



西尾維新

NISIOISIN

刀
KATANA

狐
GATARI

二
TWO

SWORD
TALE

TRANSLATED BY SAM BETT

VISIT...

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KATANAGATARI
Sword Tale

2

NISIOISIN

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KATANAGATARI SWORD TALE: TWO

Katanagatari Dai Yonwa Hakutou Hari
Katanagatari Gowa Zokutou Yoroi
Katanagatari Dai Rokuwa Soutou Kanazuchi

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NOTE ON THIS ENGLISH EDITION

This volume collects the second trio of a dozen-part series. The cover art was for the original Book Four, while Books Five and Six's have been included as a gatefold.

Where appropriate, the transliterations provided in the footnotes add bars called “macrons” above vowels for a closer approximation of the pronunciation, including for names and words that appear without them in the main text. A syllable with “*Ō*” is supposed to sound more like *boat* than *bot*. A repeated consonant like “CC” should be construed in the same manner as in *Rebecca*.

BOOK FOUR



HAKUTO
THE WHISPER



The original Book Four Table of Contents spread



PROLOGUE



They had wrested Zetto the Leveler from Komori Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan.

Wrested Zanto the Razor from Ginkaku Uneri, the Lord of Gekoku Castle.

And so Sento the Legion from Meisai Tsuruga, the Mistress of Triad Shrine.

In just three months, Togame the Schemer and her bodyguard, Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, had managed to sequester three of the Twelve Possessed, those masterworks of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki unattainable by even the Old Shogun, despite his tireless efforts. Bidding adieu to Izumo, the duo planned to make a brief stop at Owari Castle, seat of the Owari Bakufu—it was the following month, in the fourth moon¹ of the year.

They were in a tiny village on the outskirts of Suo—on the east coast of present-day Yamaguchi Prefecture. A fishing village, nothing more, and on the way to nowhere—not even an inn to lodge them. Unsure of whether namedropping the bakufu would do them any good out here, they chose not to disclose their identities, posing instead as wayfaring entertainers, only passing through, and pleaded with the village leader to let them spend the evening in his storehouse. He bought their story—and why not? With Togame’s striking hair of white and garish costumery, and Shichika’s outsize yet slender, toned physique, they certainly looked the part. Togame privately decided this would

be their standard explanation going forward.

Midnight.

Sprawled out on the straw mats² lent to them by the village leader (a kind man who seemed to harbor no suspicions and could have won his rank out of sheer goodness, a rarity today), Shichika, eyes closed, heard the door of the storehouse open.

Togame was back from her excursion.

“Wake up, Shichirin.”

“I’m not asleep.”

When called, Shichika opened his eyes. He had only closed them for a spell, and truly wasn’t sleeping. He was a katana. Togame was his master.³ How could he fall asleep before she got home safe? Lying down was the most rest he needed.

He had been waiting for Togame.

“Ah. Well then—”

Togame closed the door behind her, walked right up to Shichika, and tumbled to the floor to join him. He saw this coming, and just before her head made contact, stretched out his arm. It was a bit too muscular to make for a good pillow, but Togame was not about to complain.

“I’m so...tired.”

“Seems like it. You should have said something. I could have helped.”

“Ha. As if I need a scheming lesson from you, Shichirin.”

Though forceful, her words lacked spirit.

Such was the extent of her fatigue.

...By the way. “Shichirin”⁴ had recently been decided as Shichika’s new nickname. Sparing you the details—this decision resulted from a back and forth much like what you read at the start of Book Two. Shichika had plenty of doubts about this one-sided decision (“How am I anything like a ceramic charcoal stove?”), but at this point, he gave up without a fight. Besides, knowing Togame, it probably wouldn’t last.

Anyway. While he had been raised on an island no one ever visited, in a ramshackle hut compared to which this storehouse was a serious upgrade, it surprised Shichika that Togame, born the daughter of a mighty daimyo and having risen to the rank of Grand Commander of Arms, would settle for lodgings little better than sleeping outside⁵—in short, he was worried, for once, about her comfort—but Togame seemed fine.

After all, a lot needs to happen for the daughter of a daimyo to become Grand Commander—if you consider for a second what she must have gone through, perhaps sleeping in a storehouse was nothing special.

Point being, this was a woman who pursued her goals by any means necessary.

“We’ll leave in the morning, after thanking our host.”

“Huh?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Oh...”

After such a long pause, Shichika was surprised to hear Togame speak.

“What’s the rush? I thought we were going to stick around⁶ awhile, until we

heard more—you know, about Hakuhei Sabi.”

“It seems—the chase is over.”

“What?”

“The other day I noticed someone following us. Believe it or not, they came right up and handed me a formal challenge—proving my suspicion Sabi wanted us to follow him.”

Togame sat herself up and produced a letter from her kimono. Without much of a flourish, she handed it to Shichika, and retreated to a corner of the storehouse to untie her obi. She was worn out⁷ from her excursion, and had been on the mat by Shichika only to rest, with no intention of going to sleep fully dressed. As a matter of fact, she would have had a hard time sleeping—with all those extra layers, it was a wonder she could even walk. When it was time for bed, she had to take them off.

“A challenge...to a duel? From what I’ve heard, that sort of thing is rare these days.”

“Sabi is a walking anachronism. Anyway, read it over.”

“Easy for you to say. I can’t read hiragana.”⁸

“Oh, is that so.”

Togame was working on shedding her layers.

Although it was night, the storehouse was well-lit by the moon and stars; but Togame showed no signs of embarrassment or shame as she doffed layer after layer of sumptuous silk. The Schemer and the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu had been adventuring together for four months. By now, the bold line delineating private life from business had faded into obscurity, making the

distinction blurry and irrelevant.

“Shichirin—”

“What.”

“My hair keeps tangling. Come hold it up.”

“Sure thing.”

He sat up from the mat, as he was told, and stood behind Togame as she undressed, gathering her white hair in his hands.

.....

He looked utterly subservient.⁹

Regardless.

Whatever she had gone through, Togame had been born into nobility and secured herself a high rank in the bakufu. It made sense, to a degree, for her to handle Shichika, her bodyguard, this way, but Shichika’s comportment, showing no signs of resistance or lust,¹⁰ was seriously unnatural. Being raised on a desert island did not adequately explain why he felt no desire.

But that is why—thought Togame.

That was why.

Putting aside his first adversary, Komori Maniwa, and his second, Ginkaku Uneri—*this was why* Shichika had been able to kill off his third opponent, Meisai Tsuruga, even though she was a woman.

It’s only human—we approach those of the same sex and those of the opposite sex¹¹ in different ways. Same goes for when a swordsman makes a kill. No swordsman can kill a woman in the way he kills a man—at least, Togame had

thought as much, until the month before.

Some would hesitate to kill the opposite sex.

And some would love to kill the opposite sex.

As a matter of extremes, everyone falls into one of these two categories.

But not Shichika.

He felt neither.

He had slain Meisai—just like the other two.

Talk about extreme.

And even if he was not totally without desire—blaming his behavior on a lack of, or perhaps even a low sex drive did not seem entirely off base. Since the owners of the nine outstanding swords among the Twelve Possessed were not all necessarily male, this detail was good news¹² for Togame—

And yet it raised another pressing question.

This man—this sword.

If he saw no difference—had no preference between men and women.

What exactly made him fall for me?

“So, what does this challenge say?”

“He makes his point with lots of formal language, but for your sake, I’ll summarize: ‘Let’s fight. Winner takes the Shikizaki sword.’”

“Direct.”

“Yeah.”

“But don’t you think that sounds a little fishy? The more I hear, the weirder

this all sounds. This guy may be old-fashioned and direct—but look what happened last time. Remember when he scrapped his loyalty to the bakufu and ran off with the sword?”

Hakuhei Sabi. The swordsman Togame hired before Shichika, expecting him to carry out her Sword Hunt. He was the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—although after his betrayal, he had earned himself the name of Fallen Swordsman.

But all the same—Sabi was a master.

“His level of mastery makes the venom of the Shikizaki blades all the more potent—and pervasive. Venom courses through his veins.”

“Wow.”

“Even before he came into possession of the Whisper, Sabi was such an exemplary swordsman he had ceased to come across as human—so perhaps this was inevitable. It certainly makes sense.”

When they were entering Izumo, an emissary from the bakufu appeared before them—one of the Onmitsu, the ninja operatives whose standing in the government had plummeted thanks to the misdeeds of the Maniwa.

By his account, the Onmitsu had ascertained the whereabouts of Hakuhei Sabi—apparently, they were on a manhunt of their own, backing up the Military Directorate overseen by Togame. After losing face by association with the Maniwa, the Onmitsu were doing all they could to save their reputation.

But having a lead on Hakuhei Sabi, owner of Hakuto the Whisper, one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, did not give the Onmitsu the right to disregard Togame, whose Sword Hunt had been granted full authority¹³ by the shogunate. Indeed, this was the moment when Togame, having rounded up the Leveler and the Razor, was reaching for the Legion—eliminating Sabi was a task

which should by rights be left to her.

Togame and Shichika were heading ever westward, from Kyoto to Inaba, and on through Izumo—from whence they journeyed down to Suo, where it was said that Hakuhei Sabi had gone into hiding.





Ever westward—

“It sounds like he knows we’ve gotten some of the swords.”

“At the very least, he knows about the Leveler and the Razor. And it’s been a month since Izumo—I wouldn’t be surprised if he had heard about the Legion.”

“Word gets out one way or another, huh.”

“Everywhere you go, some guy¹⁴ is running his mouth. And a swordsman the caliber of Sabi has no shortage of admirers, eager to be of service. Alliances are dangerous. His reputation as the Strongest Swordsman is enough to win their blind devotion...but Sabi is no master in name only. Frankly, I had hoped to see you face him at a later date...but no matter. I’ll cook up some kind of a scheme—just keep fighting, hard as you can.”

“You said Hakuto the Whisper was forged to be the lightest, thinnest sword around, right? One false move...an inch off course, and the blade shatters to pieces, making it impossible to block.”

“The Whisper is invisibly thin. It’s no use trying to explain. Until you see the blade yourself, its shape defies comprehension—as you say, it is extremely fragile...but that’s what makes it beautiful.”

“Beautiful? If it were a decoration, I could understand—but does it need to be so thin? It sounds like it was made to break. How am I supposed to capture it without a scratch—”

“I know that saying this I risk offending you—but this time around, I think you need to look beyond the sword. Hakuhei Sabi must not be underestimated... Even wielding the Whisper, his powers are unbridled and unfettered. Calling him the Strongest Swordsman in Japan is not a matter of opinion or infatuation—but a matter of fact. His swing and thrust are always sure, and I

mean always. Dare I say that his attacks have never missed the mark, or even lapsed into the defense.”¹⁵

“And that makes him—the Strongest Swordsman?”

“At first glance, his ponytail almost makes him look like a girl. A pretty boy, for sure. But by his own account, he could even slice the noonday sun in half... Sabi was born too late. If he could have taken part in the Rebellion—but no. Even had he been born in the Age of Warring States, he would have been the greatest.¹⁶ He is a natural-born swordsman.”

Hakuhei Sabi was born after the Rebellion—and today, at barely twenty, he was still a boy, but to the bakufu, quite frankly—he was a terror. Perhaps the Onmitsu, who had seen their role usurped, felt up to the task, but they may also have been happy to unload this particular burden on Togame.

Then again, Togame had an interest in personally dispatching the scoundrel who betrayed her—so tasking her with the extermination of the Fallen Swordsman made the most sense. The problem was the timing.

This was not—the ideal time.

She had hoped to allow Shichika to accrue more experience first.

Experience—thus far on their Sword Hunt, Shichika had only battled three opponents to the death. While Togame had long stopped doubting his abilities, the idea of pitting him against Sabi for his fourth real fight... Well, let’s just say no amount of scheming would improve his odds.

But this was a chance she could not miss.

She could not let Sabi get away...not so long as he held one of the Twelve Possessed. And for that matter, Hakuto the Whisper. While she did not doubt Sabi’s skill, a sword that fragile—could easily be snapped in half, if things got

even slightly out of hand. If Sabi so much as stumbled, the sword could be forever lost. It was a miracle the Whisper had remained intact for all this time. Togame had hoped to make it hers before any of the other Twelve Possessed.

“Judging from the wording of his challenge, it would appear that Sabi launched a Sword Hunt of his own. The venom of the blades has got the better of him. And yet the Onmitsu make it sound as if he’s only managed to obtain the Whisper. Assuming that he’s heard the talk about us, he can hardly be amused. His prowess¹⁷ will be hard enough to handle, without getting him worked up... Our best bet is to take advantage of the sort of swagger he can get away with, as Grand Master Swordsman, since after all, he—”

“Togame.”

Shichika cut her off. Having shed layer after layer, Togame was down to her slip¹⁸—he let her tresses gather on his forearms, and rested his hands on her shoulders, gripping her collarbone.¹⁹

“I know you’re excited, but stop complimenting *other swords* in front of me—I’m not sure how strong Sabi actually is, but I thought the Kyotoryu was supposed to be the strongest. As your katana, I have my pride. And I don’t need you prodding at it any more than necessary.”

“Ah, I see.”

Jealousy laid bare.

When Shichika was acting childish, he was difficult to handle. For Togame, it also made him easy to manipulate—at some point, however, she would have to fix his tendency to flare up when something rubbed him the wrong way.

But there was no time for that now.

They were underprepared.

After all the care she put into determining their order of attack—

“...No, not my collarbone. I’m weak there.”

“?”

“Ha-Hands off my collarbone. I’ll fall to pieces.²⁰ Stop stop stop!”

“...? I was barely grabbing it. I was practically caressing you.”

“Even worse... No, nuhn, nuh.”

“Nuhn Nuh?²¹ Is that some rare, black-and-white beast from the continent? Are you okay? You’re kind of scaring me.”

“I’m fine, okay? Hold up my hair like a good boy. Seriously. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Okay? I’m sorry.”

Shichika found this strange, but did as he was told.

No skin off his back, but someone was grumpy.

“I don’t get it, Togame.”

“Like you can judge. You’re just as puzzling...but maybe I can find a way to put that part of you to use, when you fight Hakuhei Sabi. His comely²² mien holds even men in thrall.”

These willowy looks made his opponents let their guard down. None who saw him would reasonably assume he was the Strongest Swordsman in Japan. Even Togame, in their first meeting, assumed the stories she had heard must have been fabrications.²³

She could not have been more wrong—

Sabi was without a doubt the Strongest Swordsman in Japan.

And barely twenty years of age—

“But Togame— isn’t this kind of a good thing? If Sabi is the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, and I beat him, that means I’ll be the Strongest Swordsman in Japan.”

“Yes, I suppose you would...but are you sure you want that title?”²⁴

“As a swordsman—as a sword, what title could be better? All the more if it helps you.”

“Hmm...you surprise me. But know this,” Togame said. “No shortage of men have lost their lives to Sabi, after saying the same thing—so before getting too ambitious, you better figure out a way to stay alive.”

“Stay alive? How can I stay alive, unless I win?”

“That may be true—”

But winning was the problem.

The question of winning or losing was inextricable from that of life and death.

The fact that Shichika had not even considered fleeing was a sign of his dedication, or his stupidity. Hard to say.

Despite his foe being none other than the Fallen Swordsman—

“...”

While it may have been rude of Togame, or even insulting, to think these things—she was ill-equipped to stop herself.

She couldn’t help it.

After suffering the betrayal of Komori Maniwa of the Maniwa Clan—what if her second hire, Hakuhei Sabi, had not betrayed her or the bakufu—but become her loyal partner on the Sword Hunt? By now, how many of the Twelve Possessed would they have reaped?

The Strongest Swordsman in Japan—paired with her unparalleled intellect.

Three swords?

Would they have less—or more?

“...You can let go of my hair.”

“Okay.”

“Tie my obi.”

“Sure thing.”

When Togame had finally changed into her nightdress,²⁵ they returned to the straw mats and resumed their earlier posture, with Shichika lending his arm for a pillow. For him, physical proximity was all about protection.

“So, what’s the plan? Do we accept the duel?”²⁶

“We have no choice, at least provisionally. I have a handful of schemes in mind...that is, I hatched a few while I was out, but our only consolation at the moment is that one of them might work.”

“Might work...”

“I’ll work the details out along the way. I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“You’ll think of something, huh... What do you mean by on the way? How far are we?”

“We aren’t exactly close—and we’ll need to take a boat.”

“A boat?”

“To Ganryu Island.”²⁷

“Ganryu Island...”

“You’re the swordsman, whether you use a sword or not. Surely you’ve heard about the duel²⁸ which took place on that island, over a hundred years ago, between a man bearing a great sword²⁹ and another bearing two. He could not be any more old-fashioned.”

“...Or any more of a creep?”

Shichika sounded none too pleased to hear her picking up her praise of Sabi. Seeing his acid words to be a breaking point, Togame left it at that and resigned herself to sleep, but Shichika waited for her to fall asleep before letting himself relax.

And just before he did, he had a thought.

Hakuhei Sabi—Strongest Swordsman in Japan.

Does that make him stronger than sis?



Four long months—so long!

Four tough months—and so much fun!

And now we end the introduction to this stage of their journey!

Thank you kindly for your patronage...but do I speak too soon?!

What about Hakuto the Whisper?!

And Hakuhei Sabi, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan?!

How will Shichika and Togame fare against this sudden turn of events—but then again, what turn of events is any less than sudden!

Ganryu Island, that romantic destination!

A one-off horror of a move!³⁰

Behold, this purely odd piece of a period piece!

Tale of the Sword: Book Four ♪

¹ 卯月 UZUKI “rabbit moon” fourth month in the Japanese lunar calendar named for 卯の花 UNOHANA, a hollow-stemmed deciduous flower which blooms at the start of spring ² 筵 MUSHIRO woven matting which, unlike tatami, can be rolled up for storage ³ 持ち主 MOCHINUSHI owner

⁴ しちりん SHICHIRIN -rin, like -chan, is affectionate homophonous w/ 七輪 SHICHIRIN charcoal grill ⁵ 野宿 NOJUKU “sleeping in the field”

⁶ 根を張る NE WO HARU “take root”

⁷ くたくた KUTA KUTA onomatopoeia for exhaustion ⁸ ひらがな HIRAGANA the cursive wing of the Japanese syllabary ⁹ 腑抜け FUNUKE “deprived of viscera”

¹⁰ 劣情 RETSUJŌ “inferior sentiments”

¹¹ 同性 異性 DŌSEI ISEI same gender different gender ¹² 朗報 RŌHŌ “delightful information”

¹³ 全権 ZENKEN “complete rights” plenipotentiary powers ¹⁴ 輩 YAKARA generally derisive reference to a group ¹⁵ 受け太刀 UKEDACHI “catch a sword” parrying ¹⁶ 頂点 CHŌTEN “summit” the epitome ¹⁷ 剣威 KEN'I

“sword might” puns on 権威 KEN’I power, authority ¹⁸ 襦袢 JUBAN undergarment similar in shape to a kimono ¹⁹ 鎖骨 SAKOTSU “chain bone” supposedly once used for shackling prisoners ²⁰ くてっと KUTETTO onomatopoeia for crumpling ²¹ やんやん YANYAN agitated repetition of いや IYA no can begin to sound like a panda’s name ²² たおやか TAOYAKA delicate cognitive of 手弱女 TAOYAME graceful maiden ²³ 尾ひれがつく OHIRE GA TSUKU “with a tailfin tacked on” embellished ²⁴ 称号 SHŌGŌ appellation

²⁵ 寝間着 NEMAKI “sleep-room clothes”

²⁶ 果たし合い HATASHI AI formalized one-on-one battle ²⁷ 巖流島 GANRYŪJIMA “Isle of the Craggy Straits” famed site of duel between Musashi Miyamoto and Kojiro Sasaki ²⁸ 決戦 KESSEN “decisive fight”

²⁹ 長刀 CHŌTŌ long sword

³⁰ 禁じ手 KINJITE “forbidden hand” banned action (in sports)



CHAPTER
ONE

BUG UNIT
MANIWA



This was clearly an abnormal trio.

Even calling them a trio feels a little off, since apart from being three men in similar dress, they were absolutely different from one another.

A little man with cropped¹ hair.

A big man, hair hanging long.

And a middling man, whose hair was short.²

They all had different eyes and faces, each giving off his own impression—alike only in their masculinity, and their ninja garb.

This was no ordinary ninja garb. Cutoff sleeves, chains strung around their bodies—an ostentatious choice for ninjas, especially since these ones wore no masks.

However—it was all too obvious that they were ninjas.

The trio cruised ahead, nonstop. Even the way they traveled was abnormal.

The little man, the smallest of the three—

Walked with the other two perched on his shoulders—hard enough to do with children, and all the more with men who dwarf you by comparison, but his face showed no sign of strain.

Cruising ahead.

They were on the move.

On its own, this could be chalked up to superhuman strength—but the way the cropped-haired ninja moved defied pat³ explanation.

They were not traveling over land—

But *over water*—on the move.

Cruising ahead.

Cruising—with no sign of strain.

Disregarding the waves and spray.

Treading the surface without aid—the cropped-haired ninja walked with his comrades riding on his shoulders.

He trod the ocean surface, stepping with his left foot, just before his right foot sank—like in the famous piece of juvenile sophistry,⁴ which claims that this is all a person needs to do to walk on water—but the scene was too abnormal for even such crude sophistry to explain. This trio was clearly abnormal.

How could men the likes of these be ninjas?

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Ninja garb with cutoff sleeves.

Protective chains strung round their bodies.

No masks.

A crew who needs no introduction—these were Bosses of the Maniwa.



In describing the Maniwa Clan, that band of expert assassins, Togame the Schemer once said something to the effect of: “The Maniwa stay out of each other’s way—those guys work better alone.” This was not her personal opinion, as Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, and sometime employer of the Maniwa, but a decidedly factual observation.

They worked better alone. Without a doubt, that much was true.

Nevertheless, as the Maniwa Clan was an organization, its members could only be expected to branch off into factions and segregate responsibilities. Why else would they need twelve Bosses? It simply took that many leadership positions to federate⁵ the various oddball ninjas who called Maniwa Village home.

Thus, the Maniwa Clan divided ultimately into twelve parts—but the Twelve Bosses grouped together into sets of three. Whereby, the Maniwa Clan was subdivided into four factions—or units.

Namely:

Bird Unit Maniwa.

Beast Unit Maniwa.

Fish Unit Maniwa.

Bug Unit Maniwa.

In this regard, Komori Maniwa, the first enemy Shichika fought, belonged to the Beast Unit, while Shirasagi Maniwa, cut down by Ginkaku Uneri, belonged to the Bird Unit, and Kuizame Maniwa, slain by Meisai Tsuruga, belonged to the Fish Unit.

To be sure, *they worked better alone*, but these groupings were not nearly as strict as they sound, and were mostly nominal. For example, while belonging to the Beast Unit, Komori Maniwa maintained friendly relations with the Bird Unit—yet the firm bond of the Bug Unit was famous throughout Maniwa Village. If only she had known better, Togame would perhaps not have described the Maniwa in such a way.

At any rate.

Chocho⁶ Maniwa.

Mitsubachi⁷ Maniwa.

Kamakiri⁸ Maniwa.

Such were the names of the three men.

Bug Unit Maniwa—of the Maniwa Clan.

“...I can’t wrap my head around it.”

This opener came from Kamakiri Maniwa—the middling man with the short hair.

“We’ve only been dealing with the Twelve Possessed, the swords forged by swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki, for a matter of months...but in that short time, three of us Bosses have lost their lives—I gotta admit, I find it hard to believe.”

“But we know the news is true.”

Mitsubachi, the big man with the long hair, riding on the other shoulder, thus countered Kamakiri. Among the trio, Mitsubachi was the only ninja carrying a sword. And not a ninja sword—but a grand longsword.⁹

“We’ve seen Kuizame, Shirasagi, and Komori killed one by one over the past three months—more precisely, they each failed in their scramble to obtain the swords. Those are the facts. If I could turn it all around, trust me, I would do so in a heartbeat... I wonder how the other six are faring. Far be it from me to speculate—”

“I can see how it might happen to Komori.”

Thus spoke Chocho Maniwa—the little man with cropped hair, who walked over the choppy surface of the sea, bearing the two others on his shoulders.

“Komori was an exceptionally talented ninja, but his ninpo was only suited for a handful of situations—depending on the circumstances, his powers could be more than halved.”

“He had a weakness for entertaining,” Mitsubachi said, as if the failing were his own. “He was the kind of guy who would lose on purpose, just to show his enemy a good time. Whosoever his foe may be, he always strived to leave them with a smile on their face. In the end, I suppose his playful nature got the better of him.”

“Komori is dead,” said Kamakiri, “but the repossession of the Leveler is what really stung the Maniwa.”

“Still,” continued Mitsubachi, apparently ignoring his comrade’s remark, “the murders of Bird Unit Shirasagi and Fish Unit Kuizame in quick succession make for a frightening series of events—don’t you agree, Chocho? No sooner did ‘Backwords Shirasagi’ and ‘Kuizame the Sand Trap’ set off to snatch the swords

of Kiki Shikizaki than—”

“You mean *no sooner than the Kyotoryu stopped minding his own business*,” corrected Chocho. “Ever since that cheeky little Schemer hired the Kyotoryu to pick up where we left off, it seems like we’ve had nothing but bad luck.”

“...Cold feet?”¹⁰ asked Kamakiri. “You want us all to kowtow¹¹ to Owari, and live life by their rules?”

“No way,” said Chocho.

“No regrets,” said Mitsubachi.

They answered almost simultaneously.

Three of their comrades had been wasted, but their tone was resolute.

“Still,” Mitsubachi added, “any more of these embarrassments, and our reputation will be spoiled—can’t you hear the Schemer laughing as we speak? At how the Maniwa have done no good since leaving her?”

“With three of the Twelve Bosses slain, who would see us any other way? We’re in a truly wretched state. But before long, we’ll knock her off her high horse.”

“Make no mistake, friends. The Schemer has nothing to do with us—she poses no real threat. Our concern should be the Kyotoryu. Putting aside the Leveler he grappled from Komori, since it had already been in Togame’s hands earlier—he had the strength to seize the Razor and the Legion, feats deserving of the highest praise.”

“The Kyotoryu—I’ve heard that name. Hero of the Rebellion, right? Back then, our parents’ generation had free reign over the world, though I’m not so sure that anyone would call them heroes.”

“Ninjas are never the heroes, in any generation,” said Mitsubachi. “But hear this, Chocho. Our enemy is not the Hero of the Rebellion, but his son.”

“And youth makes him more of a menace. It makes *you* fearless.”

“Come on. I’m nothing of the sort—I came along this time to watch, that I might learn from your example.”

“You sound so sweet. Maybe even saccharine,”¹² Kamakiri snorted. “In that case, I guess we can break up your share? If we take down the Kyotoryu, we’ll soon be the proud owners of three more of the Twelve Possessed—exactly enough for each member of the Bug Unit, but if you insist—”

“That’s an entirely separate matter.”

Mitsubachi’s panicky correction met easy laughter—

Just then.

As they cruised over the waves, they saw an island in the distance.

A tiny island.

But this island—was their destination.

“Hey. We’re almost there, Chocho—they don’t call you ‘Flying Butter’¹³ for nothing. Even with two grown men on your shoulders, this trip across the sea was no more than a stride.”

“No matter how many times we do this, I never get used to the feeling—”

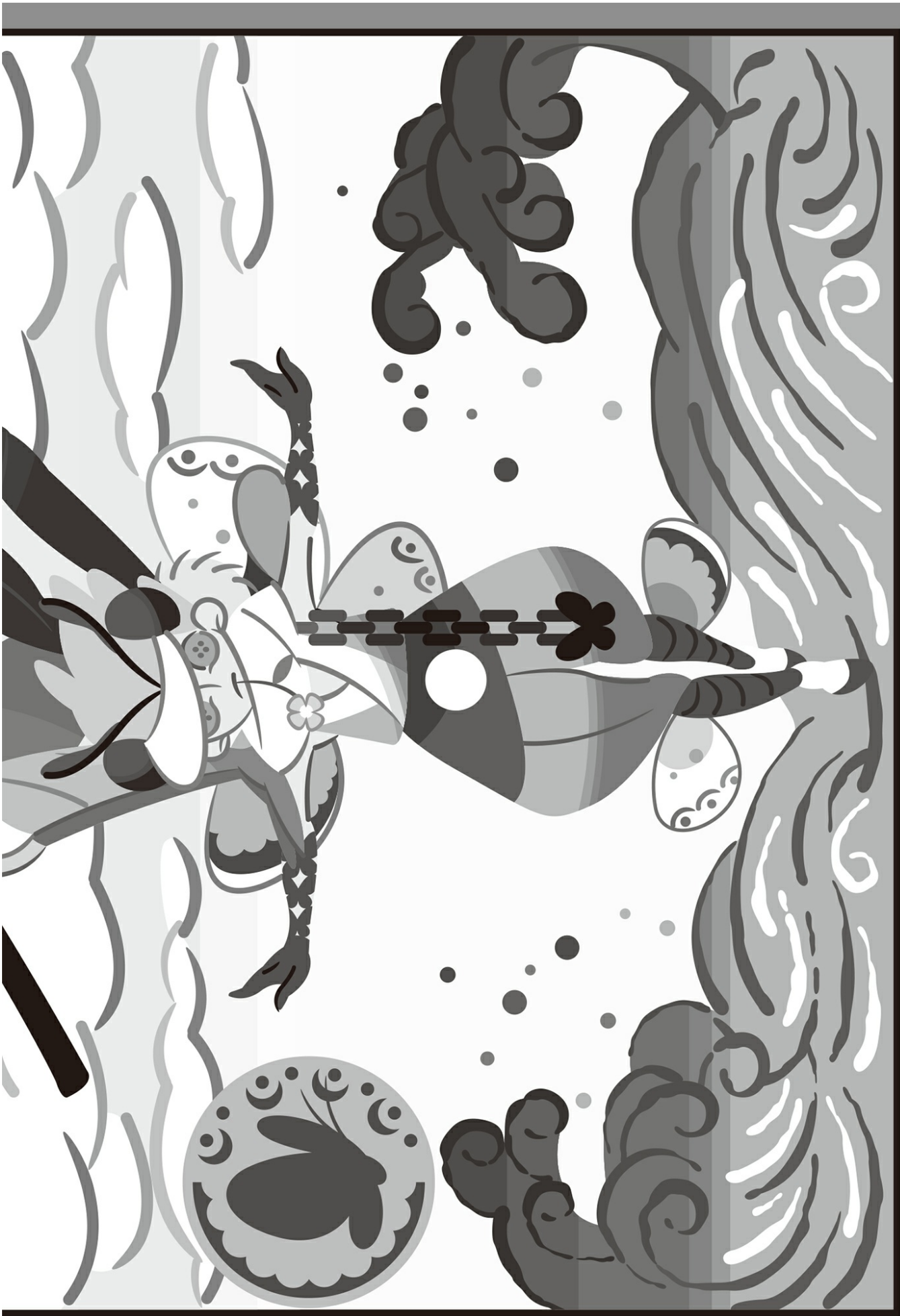
“Honestly, I’m tuckered out.” Chocho was openly complaining. “Lot farther than it looked. If I don’t take myself a fifteen-minute break once we make land, I’ll be in rough shape.”

Chocho finished strong, picking up the pace—the island looming ever closer. Amidst the final stretch, they slipped around to the eastern side, avoiding the

sandy beaches, to keep themselves from being spotted by anyone onshore, and climbed from the sea up a sheer cliff.

“Onward!” said Kamakiri. “Let’s fly like a butterfly, sting like a bee, and prey¹⁴ like a mantis. Bug Unit Maniwa—it is not for us to slink shyly forth.”





But the fated Ganryu Island—this was not.

Not on any map, and only ten miles around, this island had no formal name. Even speaking of it in the same breath as Ganryu Island—which like Seiryoin Gokenji Temple, home of the Katana Buddha, on Mt. Sayabashiri in Tosa, was extolled as a holy site by swordsmen—was a grave mistake.

To but a handful of people, this nameless place was called Haphazard Island.



By now, I have explained repeatedly why Togame the Schemer set off on her Sword Hunt. In kind, I think I have said enough to explain why Hakuhei Sabi would betray Togame and set off on a Sword Hunt of his own.

But why would the ninjas of Maniwa Village want to hunt for the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki?

Remember, these were ninjas, not swordsmen. The venom of the Shikizaki blades had far less of an effect on them—and just because Komori ran off with the Leveler did not mean that all the people of Maniwa Village were ready to betray the bakufu. This is why the Maniwa Clan had so many Bosses—to prevent a dictatorial¹⁵ situation, where the entire village was subject to the whims of an individual.

And so the reason.

One of the Twelve Possessed would fetch the same price as a country—if they

were able to obtain all twelve, they stood to win themselves an astronomical¹⁶ sum of money. Equivalent to obtaining access to a mountain rife with gold.

That would be enough—although, practically speaking, even three or four of the Twelve Possessed was plenty—enough to save Maniwa Village.

The village needed saving.

It was no longer the Age of Warring States.

The Owari Bakufu, administered by the Yanari Shogunate, had already lasted over one hundred and fifty years. This was a world of peace and order, and overall tranquility. In all of history, including up until the present day, never has a land ever stank less of blood, it is told. The last war you could even call a war had been the late Rebellion, twenty years before.

Peace and order. Tranquility.

These things are usually desirable—but favorable climates never fail to have a dark side.

Some can only thrive in wartime.

Some are bred for war and nothing more.

Warriors and samurai are obvious examples—but covert¹⁷ like the Maniwa, the Iga, the Koga, and lest we forget the Fuma,¹⁸ who in the Age of Warring States were inextricable from the daimyo, typify the breed.

Following the ascent of the Owari Bakufu, the Maniwa, as Kamakiri said, struggled to remain relevant up through the late Rebellion—and in its wake, were only assigned sporadic work, tasks you could get away with calling chores.

Your average ninja adapts to the times for the sake of survival—but the ninjas of Maniwa Village were absolute outliers, who solely undertook assassinations,

as experts in the field.

How can such grotesque specialists survive in times of peace?

How to make an honest living, when all you know is war and bloodshed?

The fact is—Maniwa Village was in dire straits.

Even the ninja tradition was under threat—just think how much invaluable ninpo had been lost in that hundred some odd years.

And ninpo was not the only thing they lost—in the preceding year, some villagers had even starved to death.

Just as a disused blade—can only rust.

Degrade, and disintegrate.

Their ninpo was no song and dance.¹⁹

Say what you will about the Maniwa being money-grubbers, it was far superior to being buried in the sod, among the grubs.²⁰ They were far beyond the point where they could get by simply taking orders from the bakufu—if Maniwa Village resigned itself to being a dog on a chain, before long every last one of its residents would find themselves out in the cold.

Which is what brought them to the idea of a Sword Hunt.

This was their last chance—to undertake a task of such proportions.

As far as Kamakiri reckoned, Komori had accepted the invitation from Togame fully intending to stab her in the back—he was the ninja she had dealt with most, which must have given him plenty to be sore about.

Now that Komori was dead, he had no way of knowing.

But Kamakiri understood his feelings.

That woman—was up to no good.

He couldn't say for sure, but he knew she was no good.

Even if Komori had never double-crossed her, and even if they let the opportunity posed by the Sword Hunt pass them by, the Maniwa and the Schemer were destined to break up. Which made this as good an opportunity as any.

Regardless.

For the Maniwa, this was a last hurrah.

Their last chance—for a last hurrah.

Gears were already in motion—not like they had any regrets, but if for no other reason, they had to follow through in order to avenge their fallen comrades.

Zetto the Leveler.

Zanto the Razor.

Sento the Legion.

Hakuto the Whisper.

Zokuto the Armor.

Soto the Twin.

Akuto the Eel.

Bito the Sundial.

Oto the Cured.

Seito the Garland.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Ento the Bead.

Quite the coincidence that the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan were hunting down twelve swords—if each of them managed to collect one, the Twelve Possessed would soon be theirs. No individual ninja had come up with the idea for a fraternal competition between Bosses. It took that shape organically.

When they were through, they would divvy up the spoils based on how many swords each ninja had obtained.

You see, each ninja's motivation to hunt down the most swords stemmed from a desire to provide for those under their command. It came from a place of human kindness—or at least ninja kindness.²¹ The challenge stimulated camaraderie and rivalry simultaneously. It was a splendid angle of attack.

(Of course, even those Bosses unable to land a single sword would not see their squads wind up with nothing.)

That said, this plan of action had a gaping hole—Kamakiri noticed it in hindsight, and anyone deserving of the rank of Boss had surely also noticed it by now. Their strategy could only reach its maximum potential if no other competition were involved.

But Komori yielded the Leveler to Togame.

Shirasagi, soon after his defeat, lost the Razor to Togame.

And from what they heard—Kuizame was forced to fight Meisai Tsuruga, then owner of the Legion, and the Kyotoryu at the same time.

Their plan was full of holes.

But there was nothing they could do.

How could they have known the Schemer had this ace up her sleeve? They never would have thought today's happy-go-lucky, peace-loving bakufu ready to deploy a menace who could hold his own against the Maniwa—the worst they had expected was the likes of the Onmitsu—but they had been careless in their estimation.

She was a most annoying little Schemer.

What the hell were these schemes anyway—thought Kamakiri.

She better quit screwing around.

In light of the intelligence Chocho had gathered, Hakuhei Sabi—the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—was on a Sword Hunt of his own, operating wholly separate from the bakufu, and evidently things were not going so well for him—but the thought of what Sabi might accomplish if he got his act together chilled Kamakiri to the bone, despite being the veteran that he was.

So long as the ninjas were competing, they were vulnerable.

Especially now that three among their ranks had perished.

At present, the threat was not so much Hakuhei Sabi—the Strongest Swordsman in Japan posed no imminent risk to the Maniwa.

No, their concern at present was Togame the Schemer—and Shichika Yasuri.

Togame, who had fathomed the intentions of Maniwa Village, and Shichika, who boasted the power necessary to take down one of their Bosses—their powers combined, the two were a menace.

Each on their own would have been manageable.

But teamed up, as a duo, they were horrifying.

That horror had to be nipped in the bud.

Which is why Kamakiri had convened the Bug Unit.

Proposing that they hold off on the competition, to join forces and take this horror down.

Chocho and Mitsubachi instantly agreed.

Any of the other Bosses would have taken their time deciding—but the bond among the members of the Bug Unit was firm. Chocho and Mitsubachi had the utmost confidence in Kamakiri. If he thought a plan was workable,²² they were not about to doubt him.

By now, Togame owned three of the Twelve Possessed.

The agreement was that they would each receive a sword, regardless of their contribution—thus they joined forces and got things going.

But this did not mean going after Togame and Shichika, who had seized the Legion at Triad Shrine and were traveling ever westward—the trio let them go, and set off in the opposite direction—heading for the place that Shichika called home.²³

In other words, Haphazard Island.

Togame the Schemer had no family, no intimate relation left alive. She may have won the rank of Grand Commander of Arms at a young age, but her origins remained shrouded in mystery. Komori had exhibited a keen interest in the Schemer and done some research—but before he had the chance to present his results, the Hell-Made was slain.

At any rate.

She was alone.

She had no confidant within the bakufu. No one around her with whom she

maintained close relations. No one she could rightfully call a mentor, and no one below her she was watching out for.

Absolutely alone.

But conversely—unencumbered.

It was clear she took great pains to live that way.

Intentionally crafting a life without a human soft spot.

The average person could never pull this off, but she could.

Shichika, however, was another story.

Embroided in his father's fate, he had been stranded on that island and raised in apparent isolation from the world—he seemed, just like Togame, to have no intimate relation left alive, but no—

Shichika Yasuri had an older sister named Nanami.

More specifically: his father, Mutsue Yasuri, Hero of the Rebellion, who had lived with them on that island for nineteen years, had died about a year ago—which is why Togame had enlisted his son, Shichika, to accompany her on her sword quest—but his sister Nanami was alive and well.

When Shichika set off from Haphazard Island, he left his sister on her own.

So careless—thought Kamakiri.

So much for a life without a human soft spot.

He had gone and left behind *the perfect hostage*—a family member, and his closest one at that, as if begging for them to have their way with her.

Komori, the first ninja to venture to this island, had told Togame, “Dirty deeds are how we make a living”—and he was absolutely right.

The three ninjas of the Bug Unit were not so naive²⁴ as to seek out direct confrontation with a combo as horrific as the Schemer and the Kyotoryu, who together had drubbed out all three of their enemies thus far, starting with Komori. But come what may, the Maniwa would not be going down without a fight. Especially if this was their last hurrah.

Kamakiri Maniwa. Mitsubachi Maniwa. Chocho Maniwa.

The three ninjas had arrived in Tango and cruised over the sea stretching from the Cliffs of Shinso, all the way out to Haphazard Island—to *abduct Nanami Yasuri*, and hold her hostage against Shichika.

“.....”

And now Kamakiri Maniwa was alone—walking through the montane forests that blanketed Haphazard Island. Silent footsteps, not so much as a rustle in the early morning air.

The other two, Chocho and Mitsubachi, were hiding out among the cliffs where they had climbed ashore. If the Bug Unit had used a boat, someone would have noticed, and word would have spread to the bakufu—and Togame, which would have ruined everything. Without the element of surprise, a hostage scenario was hopeless. Which is why they had relied on Chocho’s ninpo, and walked over the sea, as far as Haphazard Island—where their maneuvers²⁵ ended. Each Maniwa Boss possessed totally unique powers; if forced to fight in the same battle, they’d inevitably get into each other’s way—in short, “those guys work better alone.” Firm as the bond of the Bug Unit may be, they were no exception to this rule.

“Which one of you will be in charge of kidnapping the girl? Mitsubachi? Kamakiri?”

The tone with which Chocho addressed them made it plenty clear that he was wiped out from the journey over and could not be asked to go himself.

But when Mitsubachi timidly raised a hesitant hand—"I suppose that I could go..."

"No, I'll go," Kamakiri volunteered himself.

"Huh? You want to do it, Kamakiri? Aren't you the go-getter, putting yourself out there.²⁶ Not to belabor the point, but you better let Mitsubachi to do it—"

"How could a sister of the Kyotoryu not know the Kyotoryu herself? At the very least, I'm sure that she is capable of the same form of swordless swordplay. We simply cannot be too careful. I should go, since I'm the one of us whose ninpo is best suited for the battlefield. As per common practice."

"I suppose, as Captain of the Bug Unit, the choice is yours—all I know is I'm too pooped to go myself. Mitsubachi, are you okay with this?"

"How could I say no to getting a piece of the pie for nothing?"

"Could you be any less ambitious," asked Chocho, "or should I say, less motivated? It's a miracle you made it as far as Boss."

"I'll leave my Blood Crystal²⁷ behind—if things should go awry, the rest is up to you."

"Go awry? Last thing I'd expect you to say, Kamakiri! Hahaha."

As the conclusion of this conference, held just after they climbed ashore, Kamakiri left the other two behind and headed off alone. Already, he had noticed hints around the island and grasped the general whereabouts of the Kyotoryu's big sister—Nanami Yasuri. Hyperdeveloped use of the five senses was a core goal in the education of any ninja, but the senses of the Bug Unit were

exceptionally sharp.

Being unclear on what Nanami looked or acted like, he could not say for sure if it was her whom he was trailing, but assuming no one else was on Haphazard Island, he could not be mistaken. To ensure he went unnoticed, he moved carefully and cautiously, sometimes intentionally taking detours, and after about fifteen minutes²⁸—

Kamakiri Maniwa found her.

Dressed in a white kimono, as if prepared to take her own life.²⁹ A bamboo basket on the ground beside her. The girl—Nanami Yasuri—was foraging for wild greens.

He swallowed—his breath.

At the sight of Nanami.

Months earlier, when Komori came to the island, he had heard her speak but never actually seen her—which made this the first time a member of the Maniwa Clan set eyes on Nanami.

To Kamakiri.

She looked like—a corpse.

No, more like—a cadaver. A thing.

No longer human.

Neither like she was alive, nor like she ever was alive.

Her beauty, seemingly a fabrication, somehow both attracted—and kept one at bay.





Was it her warrior lineage?

Her island upbringing?

It was instantly apparent she was *out of the ordinary*, though it was unclear why.

“Yikes—good thing I’m the one who came... Chocho would have done alright, but young Mitsubachi would probably have lost his heart...”

Up until this point, Kamakiri had thought that the ultimate strategy would be to verbally persuade her, warning that there was no use trying to resist them, so as to make her a *passive accomplice*³⁰ to the Maniwa—but this plan was scrapped.

Speaking with her was too much of a risk.

Surely neither Shichika, who grew up constantly beside her, nor Togame, as another woman, felt this way—but Kamakiri Maniwa was certain. His experience thus far as a ninja pointed unquestionably to this conclusion.

Lucky for him, she did not seem like much of a martial artist—she was too thin, and her skin was pallid. It seemed subduing her with violence was the proper way to go about the abduction.

Which was when he heard her cough.

She not only looked sick. She really was ill.

And yet—Kamakiri saw that as no reason to go easy on her.

“Mantis Talons,”³¹ Kamakiri said under his breath and lifted his hands.

The nails on all ten of his fingers *began to grow at an alarming rate*. In no time, they were nearly a foot long. These were no normal nails—they were fat and thick, and sharp as knives, becoming fit for use as weapons. When they

were nearly two feet long, their growth finally subsided—but by then, each nail had assumed the form of a savage blade.

Which explains why he had no sword. Understandable.

Mantis Talons.

No further explanation necessary—this ninjutsu speaks for itself.

Kamakiri Maniwa was known among his friends as “The Head Hunter,”³² but he had no intention of cutting off Nanami’s head. He was aiming—for her arms and legs.

It occurred to him it was a shame to harm a girl so beautiful, but such sentiment was deadly. *If he didn’t cut her up just shy of dying*—he guaranteed unwanted trouble down the line.

“Hmph—”

Act fast. Don’t hesitate. Thinking is hesitating.

Enough nonsense, any more of her and even he was done for. Kamakiri Maniwa sprang out of hiding—pouncing on the slight frame of Nanami Yasuri from behind.



Time for a reminiscence.

Haphazard Island, twenty years into the past.

Three figures—on the beach, standing at the water's edge.

And two of them were children.

A boy and a girl.

The boy about four—and the girl a little older. The boy came across as ornery, while the girl was fair skinned and appeared shy—even weak.

Shichika Yasuri and Nanami Yasuri.

Brother and sister. Twenty years ago.

Shichika was already the taller of the two—

Anyhow.

The vivacious man of brawny build who faced them needs no introduction.

Indeed—it was their father, Mutsue Yasuri.

Behold,³³ the Hero of the Rebellion.

And this was twenty years ago—just after the Rebellion, when Mutsue was in the best shape of his life.

This being a reminiscence, the picture is a little grainy, making it hard to see everything with satisfying clarity, but you could tell the man was not unlike his son—though strictly speaking, it was the opposite, since Shichika grew up to look much like his father.

In which case, did Nanami look like her mother?

Where was their mother anyway?

Regardless, this giant of a man turned toward his children, whose fates were tethered to his performance,³⁴ forcing them to join him in his exile—and began to speak.

“The Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—is going to be Shichika.”

He spoke as if each word was bitter.

“After all this, I have no choice but to step down—I’ll admit, I’m not without my reservations—but I would rather face fate with my swordly pride intact. From now on, I will fulfill my duty to pass on the Kyotoryu to the next generation, no longer training myself, but training you, Shichika. From now on—until the day I die, until my body fails me, until my blade crumbles into rust, I will subject you to a grueling regimen of training, hammering home every last teaching of the Kyotoryu—being stuck here on this island may have its limitations, but when you think about it, this is perhaps the ideal incubator—insulated from the noisy outside world, we can cultivate³⁵ the Kyotoryu without distraction.”

The addressees’ reactions diverged.

It appeared that Shichika did not comprehend what his father was saying—to be sure, at such a young age, he was perhaps even too young to be called a child. He probably did not even understand they had been exiled. He had no sense of the life he was about to embark upon.





Nanami—was expressionless.

A face that gave no cues.

And yet, attentive father that he was, Mutsue was able to read Nanami.

Gently—nay.

Apologetically, he placed his mighty hand upon her little shoulder.

“Forgive me, Nanami.”

Considering her age at the time, it would have been normal for her to fail to grasp what her father was saying. But unlike her little brother, Nanami understood what he had said, what had been said to them.

Shichika had been chosen.

Which meant—she had not been chosen.

She had been left out—that much was evident.

Mutsue defended his position.

“My true wish was for you to take over the school—but that will not be possible.”

“...”

Nanami remained expressionless.

But she was only stifling³⁶ her expression.

And thereby—stifling her sense of self.

“Try to understand,” Mutsue said. “There’s nothing I can do. At this point, the only one qualified to take over the Kyotoryu is Shichika.”

When she heard these words—Nanami shot a glance at Shichika, who stood

beside her. Oblivious, dazed, literally sucking on his thumb, and staring at his sister and his father talking.

Mutsue noticed Nanami's line of sight.

"Let's make this absolutely clear, Nanami—don't hold this against Shichika. This may sound harsh, but I can't have you getting sore or teary-eyed about this. Honestly, I shouldn't even be apologizing."

"..."

"Make no mistake, you hear me?"

Mutsue let go of her shoulder. Nanami looked not at his hand, but at the shoulder where his hand had been—watching its warmth escape.

"When I say you're not qualified to inherit³⁷ the school, it's not because you're a girl, and it's not because you're sick. That wouldn't amount to a reason. It's just that I—no, not just me, this goes for all the martial artists in the world, from every discipline—Nanami, no one..."

Mutsue Yasuri, Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu, and Hero of the Rebellion—rued the very words he spoke.

"No one could raise a person of such unparalleled strength as you—"

■ ■

"Gaghh?!"

No one grasped what happened.

There was no one there to witness it, and Kamakiri Maniwa, despite being the receiver of the blow, couldn't grasp what had happened to him.

Next thing he knew—he was sent flying.

Every one of his ten nails had been snapped off.

And each of the broken nails—had turned on him and plunged relentlessly³⁸ into his abdomen.

Causing him to slam his head into the tall tree behind him—and lose consciousness, never knowing what hit him.

“...Huh?”

Meanwhile—Nanami Yasuri, despite being the one who delivered the blow, had also to catch up with the happening. A bunch of freshly foraged greens in her right hand, she spun around, angled her head quizzically, and regarded the scene with disbelief.

Kamakiri Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan, and Captain of the Bug Unit, a fearsome enough ninja to have earned the nickname “Head Hunter,” had used his ninpo and pounced upon her from behind—

For Nanami, however, this disturbance could be handled by mere reflex.

“...?”

If Hakuhei Sabi was now Japan's Strongest—then twenty years prior, around the time when he was born, and before Mutsue Yasuri was banished to the island—without a doubt the title had belonged to her.

Certified by the Hero of the Rebellion.

At the time, seven years old.

Once³⁹ the Strongest in Japan—Nanami Yasuri.

¹ 散切頭 ZANGIRI ATAMA haircut popular in early Meiji, following the heyday of the topknot ² 刈り上げた KARI AGETA snipped back ³ 親切 SHINSETSU kind, generous ⁴ 詭弁 KIBEN tricky arguments

⁵ まとめる MATOMERU group together, to command ⁶ 蝶々 CHŌCHŌ “The Butterfly” the original is glossed てふてふ TEFUTEFU, an old way of transliterating the word, rather than ちょうちょう CHŌCHŌ, but it is pronounced the same ⁷ 蜜蜂 MITSUBACHI “The Honeybee”

⁸ 螳螂 KAMAKIRI “The Praying Mantis”

⁹ 大太刀 ŌDACHI long katana

¹⁰ 後悔 KŌKAI regret “belated guilt”

¹¹ 唯々諾々 II DAKUDAKU acquiesce ¹² しおらしい[...]しらじらしい SHIORASHII, SHIRAJIRASHII meek vs. disingenuous ¹³ 無重の蝶々 MUJŪ NO TEFUTEFU The Weightless (but also Fold-or Ply-less) Butterfly ¹⁴ 食らう KURAU eat, devour; the original does not pun here ¹⁵ 独裁体制 DOKUSAI TAISEI “alone-deciding regime”

¹⁶ 天文学的 TENMONGAKU TEKI astronomical; often used figuratively to denote scale in Japanese too ¹⁷ 乱破 RAPPa “chaotic gash” a synonym for ninja emphasizing the outlaw facet ¹⁸ 風魔 FŪMA “Wind Demons” famous ninja clan based in modern-day Kanagawa ¹⁹ 飾り物 KAZARI MONO decoration ²⁰ 金の亡者[...]亡者 KANE NO MŌJA, MŌJA “lost one for money” vs. the dead (figuratively, lost soul) ²¹ 人情[...]忍情 NINJŌ, NINJŌ

“human feelings” vs. neologism that swaps in the character for *ninja* ²² 合理 GŌRI “matches reason” rational, reasonable ²³ 故郷 KOKYŌ “late country”

²⁴ うぶ UBU “newborn”

²⁵ 共同行動 KYŌDŌ KŌDŌ “group movement”

²⁶ 自ら立候補 MIZUKARA RIKKŌHO announcing one’s candidacy; nominating oneself ²⁷ 臙脂水晶 ENJI SUISHŌ alludes to 臙脂虫 ENJI MUSHI cochineal insect (source of scarlet dyes) ²⁸ 半刻 HANKOKU half of 一刻 IKKOKU, an Edo-era unit roughly equaling thirty minutes ²⁹ 死に装束 SHINI SHŌZOKU white clothes traditionally worn for burial, and especially ritual suicide ³⁰ 消極的な協力者 SHŌKYOKUTEKI NA KYŌRYOKUSHA a so-called “negative cooperator”

³¹ 忍法爪合わせ NINPŌ TSUME AWASE “Ninpo Meeting Fingernails” plays on the hardly violent 詰め合わせ TSUME AWASE assortment (usu. of food) ³² 首狩り KUBIKARI neck hunter; 首 KUBI “neck” can refer to a severed head in Japanese ³³ 初登場 HATSUTŌJŌ “first appearance”

³⁴ 行為 KŌI act, deed

³⁵ 純粹培養 JUNSUI BAIYŌ “pure culture” as in lab biology; intentionally anachronistic ³⁶ 殺している KOROSHITE IRU killing ³⁷ 跡取り ATOTORI “take the track/site”

³⁸ 容赦なく YŌSHA NAKU without mercy ³⁹ 前 ZEN usually means “front/before”; here “former(ly)”

CHAPTER
TWO
TORTURE
TIME





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...

...

Kamakiri Maniwa finally came around.

And when the battle-hardened¹ ninja, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan, and Captain of the Bug Unit, opened his eyes, he understood his circumstances instantly—he had been lashed upright to a tree.

His irons² were the very chains that had been wrapped around his body—it seemed that while he was unconscious, they had been undone and repurposed. They bound his upper body, arms and all.

All ten of the nails that had been thrust into his body were removed—and furthermore, all ten of the wounds they made were treated, to stop the bleeding. It was his good luck that none of them were fatal—but no, this was not luck. He had not worn the chains, now lashed around the tree, for show; like armor, they had blocked his vital organs—in which case, the talons (however they had been broken off) could not have hurt him mortally. His wounds were neither grievous nor life-threatening—but did that mean...had the girl avoided his vitals—*which is to say the chains* when she repaid him with his nails? To ensure that all ten stuck straight into his body, albeit not lethally? Had she

decided on this move instinctually? That was the only explanation, but in that case, you could hardly call it a decision...

He looked around.

No one there—having only just arrived, Kamakiri had no hope of orienting himself in the forest. At first, he thought that he was in the place where he had lost consciousness—but after a time, he realized he was not.

Judging from the position of the sun, it had been about another fifteen minutes...

“No use trying to finish³ yourself off,” a voice called out to him.

Nanami Yasuri. Approaching him head-on, taking her time.

She was like a cadaver—like something inanimate.

“While you were down, I relieved you of the poison you had stashed in your molar.”

“...”

So she had searched him head to toe.

In that case, she had rid him of the various secret weapons⁴ he had hidden in his ninja garb—which failed to bother Kamakiri in the least.

As goes without saying, he would never think to take his own life.

This was not a situation where such measures would be necessary.

He was alive—after all of that, alive.

He may have fallen victim to a bizarre counterstrike, but he nevertheless survived—which meant not all was lost. Far from it—a ninja did his best work in conditions like these.

“I was bringing home the greens that I had foraged—I rushed back, but I hadn’t thought you would wake up so soon. It seems I kept you waiting. Please accept my apologies.”

“...”

Nanami greeted him politely, not at all the way you would expect someone to confront an intruder—or assailant—but Kamakiri answered her with silence. It was best to play the docile captive, who sees no hope in fighting back.

“I really do apologize—but now I’ll need to torture you,” Nanami swiftly added. Her expression was expressionless.

Kamakiri could surmise nothing from that face.

“While you were unconscious, by which I mean after I tended to your wounds, I took it upon myself to bring you here—because your friend is buried over there.”

Nanami spoke calmly, still expressionless.

If you looked in the direction she was pointing, you could see a boulder that did not seem to have wound up there naturally.

“...”

“My brother buried him. I believe he called himself Komori Maniwa. From what I hear, he dressed the same as you... I wanted to at least point out that I would bury you in the same place, after you die...”

Nanami lowered her hand and turned once more toward Kamakiri.

Expressionless.

“Now tell me. It’s not a bad place to die, in my opinion, but I’d prefer to let you choose.”

“Choose—what?” Kamakiri addressed her for the first time. “What am I choosing between?”

“Whether to die having talked,” explained Nanami, “or not.”

Her voice was free of doubt—and of any cruelty.

She made it sound like this was normal.

“It doesn’t matter either way to me,” she said.

Nanami took a few steps and reached down. She picked up one of the ten nails that had been snapped and thrust back into Kamakiri during their fight (such as it was). Ah yes. Using an enemy’s weapons to torture him...ravaging the body, while humiliating the individual. She had used the chains to lash his body for essentially the same reason.

Kamakiri was impressed.

Her sharpness in battle had all too literally sunken in—but now she was proving her worth as a tactician.⁵ You would never have thought she had been raised on a desert island.

But her brilliance—was not beyond manipulation.

She was fighting a ninja, but when she had the chance to kill him, she did not finish the job—and he would capitalize on that oversight.

While he may not prevail in a straight battle of wits—he was not about to be outcheated.

“Although I must say, I’m no expert at torture. It may be wrong of me to say so, but to be honest, you’d be doing me a favor if you died quietly—I don’t really have that many things to ask you, and I think I have a pretty good idea of things already.” Nanami scrutinized⁶ the talons she was holding. “Maybe I should

check a few things first, though. Since there's a slim chance you might be dressed alike by pure coincidence—you are in fact one of the Maniwa, correct?"

"I am," admitted Kamakiri.

Now that she had brought him to the gravesite of Komori, it seemed pointless to lie or to be silent.

Pure coincidence—Nanami surely knew better. There was no way.

"And the Maniwa Ninja Clan...isn't that a bit too long? How about I call you guys Maniwacs? It's cute and fun."

"..."

Regardless of her worth as a tactician, she and her brother were products of the same environment and had the same sensibilities.

Kamakiri had nothing to say.

You could say he let it go.

"Next, I'd like to ask what brought you to this island—but I think I already know."

He was here to abduct Nanami Yasuri, and hold her hostage from Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—to mess up⁷ the Sword Hunt he was on.

And to steal whatever swords they had landed.

"In fact, seeing you is a relief. You could even say I'm glad you came. Having the Maniwacs show up on the island—is solid proof that Shichika and Togame's Sword Hunt is proceeding according to plan. Otherwise, why would you bother coming all the way out here? I knew the time would come, sooner or later.

"Four months," Nanami said as if to herself. "I wonder how many swords they've rounded up by now."

It was not an actual question, but Kamakiri answered anyway. “Two. Factor in Zetto the Leveler, which they grabbed before they set off, and that makes three.”

“Sounds like they’re taking their time. But I guess Japan is a big place. Maybe that’s how it goes...”

She was disappointed?

It seemed she had expected them to have more swords by now. This despite the fact that rounding up two of the Twelve Possessed, those masterworks not even the Old Shogun could obtain, was plenty cause for celebration in its own right.

She was a mysterious woman.

Kamakiri had been misled by his first impression of her.

This woman—was dangerous.

This went beyond her skill and spirit—she was a fundamental menace.

“I have yet to meet—or actually even see your brother, but if he is the new master,⁸ does that mean Shichika is even stronger than you?”

“Huh? Oh, no—I’m not sure. It’s been about a year since we had a match⁹—and besides...” Nanami dodged the question, “I share the Kyotoryu as you probably suspect, but only because I’m of the Yasuri bloodline. As for whether I’m a swordsman, I’m not sure what to say.”

“...That move you used back there against me—was that not the Kyotoryu?”

“As a matter of fact, that was the Ominaeshi,¹⁰ one of our defense moves. It’s a type of dattojutsu. Basically, you break the enemy’s sword and turn it against him. I was acting on my reflexes, and used it on you ten times over, for each of

your talons—but hold on, why am I the one answering the questions?”

She sounded sarcastic, however accidentally.

“Well then—where was I.”

Nanami had taken over. On with the questions.

“How many of you came this time?”

“What makes you even ask that?”

How had she noticed there was more than one of them?

That he was joined by Chocho and Mitsubachi...

“What a weird question! I’m obviously here alone—our village hardly has the manpower to send a crew of ninjas to kidnap a single girl. Of course, if I had known how powerful you were, I would have come with ten or twenty others.”

“But kidnapping me can’t be your sole objective—I’m sure that’s just the first step in your plan. In which case, there’s nothing odd about you coming as a group. Since Shichika has three swords, you could divide them perfectly, if there were three of you.”

“...”

He could not risk responding.

This was a trap.

She was just guessing¹¹ so she could observe his reaction—true, she had pinned it down,¹² but as she herself was surely aware, her words and her conjectures had nothing to back them up.

“It would help things if you gave me a number and told me about each ninja’s ninpo.”

“ ...”

“Oh, by ‘help things,’ I mean it would help me, not help you stay alive. Just making sure there’s no confusion.”

“ ...”

“Actually, this is sort of embarrassing, but just now, after bringing home the greens, I got lost along the way back—and wound up on the overlook. As far as I could tell, there was nothing like a vessel anywhere onshore,” Nanami said, pausing between her phrases. “Not like I can see the entire ocean from up there, but it sort of made me wonder—if maybe you guys used your ninpo, to make it here without a boat.”

Merely conjecturing, she was nailing bullseye after bullseye—Kamakiri took pains not to show any reaction.

Nanami added nothing more.

Silence took over the forest—but not for long. Nanami, holding the talons, took another step closer to Kamakiri.

“Let me tell you something about my brother.”

“ ...”

“Way back when, he used to bite his nails—I told him to cut it out because it was bad manners, but he wouldn’t listen, just kept on biting them. His thumbnails, in particular, were all chewed up¹³—so one day, I peeled off all his nails for him.”

Nanami spoke—approaching one step after another.

“After that, he never bit his nails again. He was basically an infant, and this was part of growing up, so I don’t mean to compare what I did with torture—but

for you, I thought I might try the reverse.”

Kamakiri gathered from her natural, even seamless movements what was coming next, but had no chance to clamp his lips. Stopping right before the tree where she had restrained him, Nanami took the talons...hard and sharp as daggers, and poked the tips—into his mouth.

“Have a bite.”

“...”

As part of his ninja training, Kamakiri had learned to withstand torture. The idea of slipping a sharp blade into the supple oral cavity was nothing new to him; she could have done far worse. On the spot, he could imagine five methods more horrific. All the same—the sight of Nanami’s placid face as she executed the procedure was far more terrifying than the act. Normally, torture is exhausting to perform. It places an oppressive burden on the soul, threatening your composure...

But this girl—had unbelievable nerve.

She must not be—normal.

“What’s wrong? Just pretend you’re a kid again—and chew your nails like a good boy. It may hurt your tongue a bit, but who needs a tongue if you won’t talk?”

“Ah, wait—understood...”

His words said one thing.

But in his heart, Kamakiri was beaming.

He had won.

Nanami had an odd mind, capable of horrific things, but at this point, that

mattered none to Kamakiri. With Nanami *close as she was*, the conditions—

Kamakiri flipped over his wrists, spreading his ten fingers.

Ten fingers, missing their nails.

His upper body, arms and all, was held fast to the tree, but he was not exactly hogtied.¹⁴ He may not be able to move his arms—but his wrists, barely clearing the chains, were free enough to use.

You needed to tie a captive's arms behind him.

It appeared that after breaking off his arsenal¹⁵ of nails and stripping him of all the weapons¹⁶ on his person, Nanami had relaxed, thinking he lacked any means of recourse—but no.

She underestimated his Mantis Talons.

Kamakiri was *able to shoot out new nails repeatedly*. Sure, he had his limits—but breaking off or tearing free his nails just once was not enough to leave him weaponless!

“What have you understood?”

“Ah, I mean, I'll talk, about our ninpo—ninpo—Ninpo—”

But Kamakiri's cry became a battle cry—

“Mantis Talons!”

Kamakiri shot out his nails.

Unable to give them time to fully form, they were somewhat lacking in thickness, but he made sure the tips were plenty sharp. Aiming straight for Nanami, he grew all ten nails at max speed.

Giving him ten spears.¹⁷

Yet—

“...”

Nanami—with a slight twist of the hips, dodged all ten of the talons. No clean break, the ten nails tore through her kimono, nearing her skin and plunging deep. At first glance, it appeared that she had moved too late, but not so—in shifting slightly, she had intentionally caught the nails in the cloth of her sleeve. By dodging him with such precision, she had barred the nails from further action. Thanks to her kimono, all ten had been taken out of service.

Of course, this was no more than a precautionary measure. In other words, she could comfortably dodge Kamakiri Maniwa’s ten nails regardless—

Thus evading his attack, Nanami jammed the talons down his throat. Their tips tore through the back of his windpipe—into the trunk of the tree behind him.

In the end, Kamakiri Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan.
Chose the latter—and died without talking.

“Phew...”

She was spent.

Twisting her body on tiptoes,¹⁸ Nanami drew back to free her kimono from the second set of talons—and let out a sigh.

She could sigh with the best of them.

“Not like I thought torture could make a ninja talk, but I have to hand it to him. Even when I tried to nail¹⁹ him down, he simply wouldn’t crack—hmm. I’d better assume a few more of them are here—but Shichika.”

Realizing how tattered her kimono had become from Kamakiri’s nails, Nanami

smiled.

A resolutely evil smile.

“Only two more swords in all that time—lazy boy. When he comes home, I’m giving him a thrashing.”



*Pop.*²⁰

Without warning, the Blood Crystal set upon the cliff cracked in two.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Chocho Maniwa and Mitsubachi Maniwa looked up with sober eyes.

The crystal had been left in their safekeeping when Kamakiri Maniwa set off to snatch Nanami Yasuri. Peculiar to Maniwa Village, the Blood Crystals were precious and scarce, and as a rule, only entrusted with Maniwa Bosses. Carried close to the heart, these artifacts took on the spirit of their owner, in whose absence they could serve as beacons of distress.

And when the crystal broke—that meant its owner bit the dust.

“It appears that Kamakiri—has been slain.”

“Sure does...”

On the outskirts of Haphazard Island, hiding out among the cliffs, awaiting the return of Kamakiri, their reaction was—utterly calm. As ninjas, they had learned to override²¹ their emotions; when a comrade died, they would never make a scene.

But overriding your emotions—is not the same as having none.

Suffering the death of Kamakiri, who was not only Captain of the Bug Unit, but a dear friend, Chocho and Mitsubachi could hardly be expected to feel nothing.

Their expressions may not have changed—but something in the air between them had.

“I mean,” said Chocho, “not to sound like Kamakiri, but I can’t wrap my head around it. How could he lose to her, when she isn’t even master—just a normal girl? I can’t imagine anyone who could withstand his Mantis Talons. Even Kuizame, that diva,²² tipped his hat to Kamakiri. Ninpo aside, he was experienced, and formidably so. No matter how you look at it—I can’t believe that he lost.”

“The Blood Crystal is not infallible,” noted Mitsubachi. “Sometimes it remains intact even when its owner dies, and there have been cases where it crumbles, only for its owner to return alive—for now, though, we should act as if Kamakiri has been beaten. The very sentiment that you expressed, Chocho, your confidence that Kamakiri could not lose, may have been what made him slip.”

“Slip? Kamakiri, of all people?”

“I highly doubt it—no matter the battle, he has never been one to misread an opponent. The idea of him slipping is ridiculous. In which case, there can be but one explanation: that woman is *a capable opponent*.”

“ ... ”

“At the very least, we should assume as much—since neither of us, Chocho, can expect to outdo Kamakiri on the battlefield.”

“Showing up to take a hostage, only for the hostage to take us down—no way. As it stands, we look like a bunch of stooges. Idiots, even. But it sounds like the Kyotoryu is absurdly²³ strong—which explains²⁴ how they could round up two of the Twelve Possessed in such short time.”

“Perhaps the girl is even stronger than her brother—no?”

“Not a chance—if she’s so strong, why didn’t she join the Schemer on her Sword Hunt?”

“I’m sure she had her reasons. The Schemer is known to be disliked by other women. That may have been enough.”

“Come on. Don’t be silly.”

Chocho had himself a laugh—and stood.

Bewildered by this gesture, Mitsubachi asked him: “Wait, what do you intend to do? I thought I—was the next in line.”

“No, I’ll go, I’ve gotten all the rest I needed. Not tired anymore...”

“But considering the circumstances, I think my ninpo would be far more potent, Chocho. Your ninpo is a bit too—unmediated.”

“Hear this, Mitsubachi. I cared for Kamakiri.”

“I felt the same.”

“And I care about you too. It’s not like you mustn’t ever die on me—but if any member of the Bug Unit is to live through this, it should be you. You’re still so young.”

“Come now...”

Hearing such a thing from Chocho, who was not one to talk about his feelings, Mitsubachi was at a loss for words.

Chocho, seeing this reaction, laughed with gusto.

“Kah kah kah. Have some sense and let an older bug take the stage²⁵—if the Kyotoryu’s big sister is as powerful as you think, I have a better chance of stopping her. Find yourself a perch and watch us fight. If I should lose, learn from my mistakes, and capture her yourself.”

“...”

After the loss of Kamakiri, premier fighter of the Bug Unit, this was their best strategy. The more they knew about their enemy, the more effective Mitsubachi’s ninpo would be.

“But what about you, Chocho?”

“Please. I’m not about to sacrifice my life. Why would I suddenly start behaving like a normal ninja? Who knows? Maybe I’m just talking sly, angling to take the prize, lad.” Chocho laughed some more: “Kah kah kah.”

But then his face went serious.

“Listen, Mitsubachi.”

“...I’m listening.”

“When this job is over, I’m getting married.”

“...”

He was sealing the deal on his death.²⁶

Not like anyone had forced him. It was all on him.

“In this line of work, we could die anytime or anywhere. For a while that held me back—but whether we win or lose, this job will be my last. I’ve decided.”

“Oh, I see—and the bride?”

“Someone we both know. Don’t tell me, perceptive as you are, you failed to notice? One of the Twelve Bosses. Oshidori²⁷ Maniwa from the Bird Unit—”

“Oshidori...haha, wow. I bet she’ll whip you into shape.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“Well, Chocho, sounds like it’s time to settle down and be a family man.”²⁸

“Guess so. But you know what, whenever I’m alone with her, she’s so damn cute... I’ve never told you this before, Mitsubachi, but I was born down south. I’m not originally from the village—she loves me all the same. I can safely say that I’m the bug I am today because of her—funny, with a girl from the Bird Unit and a guy from the Bug Unit, you’d expect a more predatory relationship. Well, I guess you could say she had a hungry heart...”

Chocho was lapsing into reverie.

What on earth had gotten into him?

“Whew, oh boy—”

He was on a roll. Patting around his ninja garb, he found a cigarette, imported from the western lands,²⁹ but caught himself—

“Whoa, whoa. Almost forgot I quit.”

He split the cigarette in half.

Yep. That settled it. He was a goner.³⁰

“Oshidori said I had to, or she wouldn’t marry me.”

“Ah, o-okay, I see. But—” While the full extent may have been lost on Mitsubachi...he tried to save his comrade, perhaps a bit too late. “Chocho, as great a story as this is, maybe we should leave it.”

“Huh? You sure?”

“Yes, I think I get the gist. I’ll leave it to you—but I’m a ninja too. I’m not trying to play second fiddle. If something happens, I’m not coming to the rescue.³¹ Don’t expect me to help you out. If you get your butt whipped—”

“Fine by me. If things go awry, I’ll do my best to drag them out. That way you can learn as much as possible.”

With that, Chocho retrieved half of the Blood Crystal; wearing a rueful visage, he tossed it to Mitsubachi.

“What’s this about?”

“Bug Unit forever. Even in death, our bond will not be severed.”

“Well, well. Chocho, you’re a pretty good guy after all.”

Mitsubachi sounded uneasy, as if this sudden burst of goodness, from a man who hitherto had shown no taste for decency, were another sign of his impending death. Chocho looked embarrassed.

“Cut it out.”

The man stuffed the other half of the Blood Crystal in his ninja clothes.

Slipping it into the left side of the garment. By his heart.

...Foreshadowing his survival, just barely, at the last moment—Chocho set off³² into battle.



Time for another reminiscence.

Not twenty years into the past—but one.

Just after Mutsue Yasuri, Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu, the Hero of the Rebellion—and father to Shichika and Nanami breathed his last. A week after burying³³ Mutsue, Shichika challenged his sister to a match.

Nanami would tell Kamakiri Maniwa that it had been about a year since she and her brother had a match, making that the last time they fought each other—but in fact, it was also their first fight. Their father Mutsue had strictly forbidden Shichika from sparring with Nanami.

In other words, to date it was the one and only time that Shichika took on Nanami—so how did things play out?

Simply put, there was no winner.

Looking out for his sick sister, Shichika set a time limit for the fight—and within the allotted time, no winner was decided.

You could say that it was basically a draw.

None bore witness to the battle, but if any had—and were asked to make the call,³⁴ whoever so tasked would have declared Nanami the victor.

The difference in ability between Shichika and Nanami was so great there was no contest.

The fight was not exactly undecided—she merely stopped before things went too far.

Like an adult humoring a child.

No—perhaps it was more like a puppy playing with its owner.

Nanami fielded every one of Shichika's attacks—but never returned the favor, for the duration of the match.

Shichika expected his sister, up against him, to behave this way—but thought that if he pushed her hard enough, she would eventually fight back.

He thought wrong.

As it turned out, Shichika failed to get a rise out of Nanami. For nineteen years, he had been training without rest, through rain and wind and snow, but after all his effort, he was not even at a level where his sister felt the need to hit him back. Offense was out of the question, but she opted against even defense moves like the Ominaeshi.

Shichika, who based on looks alone seemed sure to win, wound up flat on the ground, which was as far as things went—ending the fight, the first they had engaged in their entire lives.

“You did pretty good,” Nanami told her little brother, when they were through. “Not as good as Dad was at his best, but you're getting closer all the time. Keep it up—no slacking. Spare no effort.”

As one might imagine, Shichika was extremely sore about his loss—it took about a week for him to rally.

And why not.

After spending nearly every waking moment of the last nineteen years in

training, he had failed to land a single swing against his sister, whom he had never seen practicing at anything, not even once.

Enough reminiscence³⁵—

¹ 百戦錬磨 HYAKUSEN RENMA “burnished by a hundred fights”

² 束縛 SOKUBAKU “bundle tie” restraints

³ 自決 JIKETSU “self-resolve” take one’s own life

⁴ 暗器 ANKI concealable implements of assassination

⁵ 知謀策略の面 CHIBŌ SAKURYAKU NO MEN in the area of plots and schemes

⁶ ためつすがめつ TAMETSU SUGAMETSU look over something carefully

⁷ 邪魔 JAMA hinder; commonly used despite the ominous 邪 JA wicked 魔 MA demon

⁸ 当主 TŌSHU current lord (of a school)

⁹ 手合わせ TE AWASE “meeting (of) hands” sporting fight

¹⁰ 女郎花 OMINAESHI “The Maidenflower” important flower in Heian-era Japanese literature

¹¹ 当てずっぽう ATEZUPPŌ “shot in the dark”

¹² 正鵠を射ている SEIKOKU WO ITE IRU “shot the correct swan” bullseye, in archery

¹³ ぼろぼろ BORO BORO onomatopoeia for ragged

14 封じた FŪJITA sealed, blocked

15 凶器 KYŌKI weapon (often in criminal context, as in “murder weapon”) 凶 KYŌ malign

16 武器 BUKI weapon (the most standard term) 武 BU martial

17 槍 YARI spear (literally, as in the weapon)

18 爪先立ち TSUMASAKI DACHI “standing on toenails”

19 鎌をかける KAMA WO KAKERU trick into talking; pun on 螳螂 KAMAKIRI praying mantis

20 ぱりん PARIN onomatopoeia for glass (and similar objects) shattering

21 操作 SŌSA control, manipulate

22 傍若無人 BŌJAKU BUJIN arrogant in bearing

23 べらぼうに BERABŌNI confoundedly (from 籠棒 BERABŌ, the name of a 17th-c circus freak)

24 頷ける UNAZUKERU “to be nod-worthy”

25 見せ場 MISEBA scenes in a play where actors can show off their skills

26 死ぬ伏線 SHINU FUKUSEN foreshadowing death (characters who confess such plans tend not to survive)

27 鴛鴦 OSHIDORI “The Mandarin Duck” plays on おしどり夫婦 OSHIDORI FŪFU happily married couple

28 年貢の納め時 NENGU NO OSAMEDOKI “time to pay one’s dues (taxes)” often means going to jail

29 南蛮渡来 NANBAN TORAI “arriving from the southern barbarians” (or

so the pre-modern Japanese expression had it, due to the maritime route)

³⁰ 彼の死亡は確定した KARE NO SHIBŌ WA KAKUTEI SHITA his demise is a certainty (another narrative trope)

³¹ 助太刀に入る SUKEDACHI NI HAIRU “enter as a helping sword”

³² 出陣 SHUTSUJIN leave camp; sortie

³³ 埋葬 MAISŌ burial portion of a funeral

³⁴ 判定試合 HANTEI SHIAI when the referee determines victory

³⁵ 回想終了 KAISŌ SHŪRYŌ “recollection over”

CHAPTER
THREE
WATCH
AND
LEARN



When Togame the Schemer chose Shichika Yasuri to be her partner and took him from Haphazard Island on her Sword Hunt, it goes without saying that she had not failed to consider the question of Nanami Yasuri, who was without a doubt a breaking point for Shichika. Whether at the hands of the Maniwa or of some other party, this sort of thing was bound to happen—which is why Togame had proposed for Nanami to sail with them to the mainland, and to take refuge in Owari Castle until the Sword Hunt had been brought safely to an end.

Nanami rejected the idea wholesale.¹

A curt refusal.

Come what may, I'm staying on the island—

I can take care of myself—

So long as I live, I am not leaving this island—

Please don't pay me any mind—

Firm.

In this respect, Togame and Nanami were perhaps too much alike. When dissenting, they became so entrenched² words could never do it justice. Shichika stood quaking³ off to the side, unable to speak up.

Knowing firsthand how strong his sister really was, he agreed with her—but

then he almost always did, regardless of the circumstances.

In the end, Togame cracked.

Not so much cracked—as bent.

She was not beyond sympathizing with Nanami's aversion to let others call the shots (this being yet another way that they were alike)—case in point, it had been Nanami, and not Togame or Shichika, who made the first move when Komori Maniwa blitzed the hut.

Shichika, the current master of the school, and Nanami, head of the house, had a tacit understanding that Nanami was stronger than Shichika—stronger by far. It was the sort of thing that went without saying; but while Togame was not privy to the facts, she trusted that Nanami could at least take care of herself.

She would not be a burden⁴ on her brother.

At least, not in the short term.

It was decided—and three whole months had passed since Togame and Shichika set off from Haphazard Island, leaving Nanami behind.

Which brings us here.

“Looks like I got myself lost again...” muttered Nanami.

She had no idea—where she was.

Absolutely no idea.

While little time had passed since she had finished off Kamakiri, she should have been home at the hut by now, but somehow, she was still stuck in the mountains. Somehow—despite having spent twenty years living on the island.

So easily disoriented.

One of her many weaknesses.

Born sickly, Nanami moved at an unusually slow pace that only spurred⁵ her tendency to lose her way. Playing off of Togame's habit of comparing her own strength to that of shoji paper, we could say that Nanami, head of the Yasuri family, and once the Strongest in Japan, was slow as a snail.

No wonder Shichika never asked his sister to help with the chores.

"I figured I would head home and eat dinner before looking for the ninjas, but at this rate it probably makes more sense to start looking for them now," Nanami said to herself. She had given up on going home. It would mean missing a meal, but she ate so little anyway. Were she to skip meals⁶ for a day or two, the difference would be negligible.

Plus, she no longer had a little brother on the island making her eat against her will.

"Still, this is tricky business... Forcing ninjas out of hiding is easier said than done... I'd be better off standing out in the open, and letting them find me..."

Nanami was working out her strategy.

Of course—having been raised on this desert island, Nanami had no experience in action, no experience on the battlefield. Just like when her brother fought that other Maniwac, Komori, this was her first engagement where her life was on the line. All the same, her manner and her bearing were the epitome⁷ of cool.

Her face the same as it had been when she was foraging for wild greens.

Not intoxicated by the thrill of battle—nor rattled by the horrors of battle.

Simply working out her strategy.

“But it looks like that won’t be necessary...”

Nanami stopped moving entirely, focused on the space before her.

“I’m not hiding,” she called out. “Come out and show yourself.”

For a while there was no response—but at length, a man stepped from behind a tree.

A short man with cropped hair.

“How’d you notice I was here?” he asked Nanami. “Could have sworn I was perfectly still.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve heard that one.”

Heard it over and over.

As a kid—before they came to the island, or she was even seven years old.

Could have sworn I was perfectly still?

She’d heard that pompous line again and again.

“I’m the one who should be asking you—so long as you’re alive, what makes you think you could *ever be perfectly still? If you’re standing there, you’re standing there.*”

“Hah. So you won’t enlighten me.”

Interpreting her remark in a way that was completely at odds with how she had intended it (although Nanami, unprepared to explain herself, was probably relieved to have been misunderstood), the man dropped the point, and instead assumed position and gave his name.

“I am Chocho Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan—here to carry you away.”

“What a charming way to greet⁸ a woman. I never thought the day would come when somebody would speak those words to me.”

Nanami grinned.

The aforementioned evil smile.

“Allow me to introduce myself—although if you’re here to carry me away, you must already know. However, as a matter of course—my name is Nanami Yasuri, head of the Yasuri family.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I wonder if I could trouble you to fill me in on something. A little while ago, I was assailed by someone wearing the same ninja garb as you—what was his name?”

“Huh, he didn’t tell you?”

“Afraid not...”

“Hmm, that’s not like him.”

In actuality, Kamakiri Maniwa had no chance to offer up his name before Nanami took him down; and subsequently, during torture time, the atmosphere was not exactly conducive to self-introductions—meanwhile, Nanami totally forgot to ask him who he was—although Chocho could hardly be expected to deduce as much.

He was as yet unaware.

Of the power of the woman before him.

But what could he have done—Nanami Yasuri possessed a strength that was not to be kenneled at first sight. It was nonpareil, belonging to a whole other dimension from the showy kind of strength—

“His name is Kamakiri Maniwa.”

“Kamakiri... That explains,” she said, “the way he used his nails for weapons.”

Used. Past tense.⁹

“Did you kill—Kamakiri?”

“Yeah, after he assailed me,” answered Nanami. “Since I’m assuming you guys have a legitimate reason for abducting me, I have no particular intention to plead self-defense. I buried him in the same place as Komori Maniwa, who came to this island and fought my brother.”

“...I see.”

Chocho looked solemn.

Nanami had not been expecting this reaction.

In fact, she had coolly acknowledged the ordeal it would have been to dig a hole and bury the corpse, and instead left Kamakiri where he was, chained to the tree trunk, his throat skewered¹⁰ with his own talons, but the time had come and gone for volunteering such truths.

“...”

Whatever. She would get there sooner or later.

She planned to follow through on what she promised.

At this rate, she already needed to bury *a few ninjas*—including this one—at the mentioned site.

It made sense to do it all at once.

Keep things simple.

“Oh...that’s right. I meant to ask you, Chocho. Would you mind telling me how

many of you are in your party?”

“Huh?”

“Your party—how many of you came to the island? I tried torturing Kamakiri a bit, but he wouldn’t tell.”

“And why would I tell you something he wouldn’t?”

“Ah,” Nanami conceded casually.

Chocho’s response was only natural; having directed Mitsubachi to watch the coming battle from a distance, it was best not to convey that there were ninjas in the wings. For her part, Nanami was asking him now because she had learned from her experience with Kamakiri. Torturing a ninja, even if he stood no chance, would get her nowhere—

And as it turns out, *she got what she needed.*

His retort sufficed to convince her that there was at least one more ninja. This was less to blame on Chocho being less experienced than Kamakiri, and more about whether she asked beforehand or afterwards.

That said...exactly how many ninjas remained?

There could be one...or maybe two, or three...or perhaps many more...

“Since you killed Kamakiri, I’m not about to treat you like a lady. I’m coming at you no holds barred,¹¹ with everything I’ve got. I may even have to kill you—if that’s what it takes, I’m happy to oblige.”

“Oblige? Does that mean you won’t be taking me hostage?”

“Taking you hostage would be ideal, but I came equipped with a Plan B.¹² I’m sure that the sight of your corpse would fire up your brother plenty.”

“Makes sense,” said Nanami. “Now you’re sounding like a ninja.”

“Don’t expect me to hold back—I’ll hit you with every fatal move¹³ in the Maniwa playbook. But don’t think I’m not open to surrender. If things ever get too rough for you, just say the word. Unlike that scoundrel Kuizame, I’m not one to take a life for no good reason.”

“Whatever works.”

“Hm—”

With that, Chocho entered into a stance.

It was kenpo.

Nanami had been casually observing the ninja, who wore no sword and was not visibly armed—but lo and behold, he practiced kenpo. In which case, he needed no weapons.

Karate—no, that stance...

“Don’t even bother guessing—this is Maniwa Kenpo. It stems from a completely different source than your garden-variety style of unarmed combat.”

“Maniwa Kenpo...”

“Although at this point, the bugs in my squad are the only ninjas left who use it—what’s wrong? Why aren’t you poised to fight?”

“...”

“I’ve heard about the Kyotoryu—swordplay without a sword. Basically, a kind of kenpo, right? Where the fist is wielded like a blade. I never mentioned it to Kamakiri, but I was hoping I would have a chance to fight you. In an age where everyone has started using weapons, there’s something nice about the Kyotoryu. Showing up with nothing but yourself. As a student of kenpo, I hope

you'll give me a few pointers.”¹⁴

It made sense that Chocho had this history, since he was the only member of the Bug Unit to show up with an advance understanding of the Kyotoryu. His words, while a touch taunting, surely also came from the heart if he truly planned to fight her emptyhanded¹⁵—but Nanami was unresponsive.

Positively no response.

She stood perfectly upright, hands hanging at her sides, feet normal, shoulder-width apart. To anyone, she would have looked unprepared for battle.

“...What's wrong? I meant I'd wait until you took position.”

“I heard you—but I've never actually assumed a stance before.”

“...?”

Chocho looked bewildered, as if he couldn't parse Nanami's reply. Of course he couldn't—his reaction was only natural.

“Do you mean to say the Kyotoryu has no forms?” he asked, baffled.

It hurt to ask.

But he was wrong.

A brief review of the tale of the Sword Hunt thus far will reveal that Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, boasted a variety of moves. Form One, the Suzuran, Form Two, the Suisen, Form Seven, the Kakitsubata—

And for each form, a Fatal Orchid.

That was supposed to be the essence of the Kyotoryu.

“This is what makes me an outlier to the school. But Chocho. Don't you think that all these stances—are a waste of time? Having to take position whenever

something happens can only slow you down. Plus, *like you are right now*, you end up giving away whatever you're planning to do next."

"...!"

"I hate to say it, but I can see right through your mysterious Maniwa Kenpo—just from the way you're standing."

Freestyle.¹⁶

In every martial art, the ultimate and ideal state—is a natural posture.

And Nanami—embodied this ideal.

She was truly, absolutely natural.

Then saying she had yet to take position would be nonsense. Could it be that from the instant that she noticed Chocho and stopped moving, she'd been continually prepared for battle?

"If I had to give this stance a name, it would be Kyotoryu Form Zero: the Ichijiku—" ¹⁷

Nanami made her move.

Slow steps, one at a time.

Edging closer toward Chocho and his clenched fists—

"Huh...whoa..."

Her pace—too slow for Chocho to bear.

Just as Kamakiri had predicted when he saw her.

All it took was their curious exchange, and now she had him.

"Ahhh!"

When the distance between them had been reduced to half—Chocho lost his patience and leapt forth. Closing in with a single bound, and jerking up his rear foot, he put all of his weight behind a spinning kick to Nanami’s face—

Whoosh.

As if all her sluggish movements were an act, Nanami deftly dodged his strike—and then.

“Kyotoryu—Hinageshi.”¹⁸

One of her arms, which had drooped so heavily you would think the nerves were severed, sprang to life. Swiping upwards with the blade of her hand, flicking her wrist—

“—!”

The modest-sized ninja blew away—but Nanami was the most surprised. Which made sense. The Hinageshi was supposed to rip the enemy in half; unlike the Ominaeshi she had used on Kamakiri, it was not supposed to send him flying. Heck, even the Ominaeshi relied on the enemy’s own strength, using it against him—short as he may be, Chocho’s build easily outmatched Nanami’s. Her sickly body lacked the muscle to have up and thrown him.

Nor had Chocho leapt back of his own accord.

She hadn’t felt even the least—resistance.

“Hmph—”

Midair, he executed the strangest move. *Bounding off the skinniest branch of a nearby tree, he switched direction*—sending himself back toward Nanami. As he descended, he thrust out his right hand, a counterstrike—

Instinctively Nanami rolled backwards towards safety.

Chocho's body flipped over, and he landed on his feet.

He gave her a sidelong glance.

"Nice dodge."

Tossing her a couple words of praise.

Throwing her a bone.

"Maniwa Kenpo mixed with Maniwa Ninpo—rare is the foe who can dodge the combination from the outset."

"Ninpo—"

"Harlequin Butterfly¹⁹—*my movements ignore the laws of gravity,*" he explained triumphantly, as if to make up for his earlier discomfiture. "I can carry anything, no matter how heavy, and even a branch as skinny as that serves as a foothold for me. You can hit me as hard as you want, but you'll only send me flying."

He was simply too light—to be knocked down.

That explained things.

With ninpo that can obviate²⁰ the laws of gravity, even crossing the sea with two grown men riding on your shoulders would be a simple feat.

"Are you saying that my hand never actually hit you, that the *draft* my hand made sent your body flying through the air?"

"Yeah. You could say that I'm invincible to all conventional strikes— because I'm physically impervious to them."

"How flippant²¹ of you to call it kenpo, when you use such an oddball technique—you're even bolder than I thought."

“Call me bold, if you please, but you can blame it on the ninpo. How about it? If you’re going to surrender, now’s as good a time as any, before I come at you for real.”

“Didn’t you start off for real?” Nanami shot down his overture.²²

Having witnessed the Maniwa Ninpo in action, she was far from impressed.

Her comportment nettled Chocho.

“Do you not understand—the awesomeness of my ninpo?”

“I do, without you trying to convince me. Am I correct you used this trick, your weightless footwork, to carry your friends over to our island? That would make your mission all the more covert—harder for the bakufu or for me, on the island, to detect.”

“...”

“What I really think is awesome—is all the time you must have spent learning how to do this. No trifling effort, I’m sure, you must have given it most of your life...”

Nanami spoke slowly, between sighs.

“Same goes for Kamakiri. I think he called it Mantis Talons. I can only imagine how much time it must have taken him to condition²³ his body to do that... This goes beyond the successes of your individual training. It must be a Maniwa Village tradition, a body of knowledge perfected over countless generations—the mere thought,” Nanami said. *“The mere thought—makes me jealous.”*

“...Huh?”

Disregarding this confused reaction from Chocho, Nanami continued.

“You guys are the ones who don’t understand—what *not being allowed to make any effort* feels like... No matter what I do, I won’t get any praise. Every success, every win is dismissed as inevitable. Know how that feels? No, you have no idea.”

With that—

She began to make her way again toward Chocho.

Walking the exact same way as earlier. Slow steps, natural posture.

As if her first clash with his blend of ninpo and kenpo had not impacted her strategy in the least—she moved closer to where he stood.

Chocho was perplexed.

He didn’t get what she was doing.

He didn’t get this woman—not her words, and not her moves!

“Wanna die? Be my guest!”

As Nanami approached him, for the second time, Chocho lost his patience and sprang forth, also for the second time.

But so what.

If there was *one thing* he got about this woman, it was that she could not counter the Harlequin Butterfly!

“Rahh!”

Summoning all his energy—and erasing his weight, including that of his ninja garb, Chocho leapt into the sky. Paddling the air, he traveled vertically, climbing through the branches of the trees, even springing from the leaves that he shook free—and when he reached top speed, he plummeted!

Not breaking form, even as he fell, Chocho aimed straight for Nanami!

Aimed.

But she was not where he expected her to be—Nanami Yasuri was not there beneath Chocho's fist.

“Whuh?!”

Then where was she?

Nanami Yasuri was right in front of Chocho Maniwa.

Facing him.²⁴

Describing them as “facing” one another makes them sound poised for battle—which they were, only midair.

Chocho was floating, and so floated Nanami.

“Huh?! Wh-What the—”





“I knew it. The Harlequin Butterfly—it’s all about the footwork. It seems obvious now, but your weight doesn’t actually disappear...”

Time to clear something up.

Twenty years prior—Mutsue Yasuri, Hero of the Rebellion, had named²⁵ Shichika, not Nanami, the next Master of the Kyotoryu. Then, for nineteen years, Mutsue had conveyed the teachings of the Kyotoryu to Shichika alone—in other words, Mutsue taught Nanami nothing.

Not because of her sickly constitution.

And surely not because she was a woman.

She was simply too strong to learn anything from anyone—

Not only did Mutsue refuse to teach Nanami, he barred her from all manner of exertion. She was not allowed to train in any way.

Her strength broke the mold.

Her strength broke the rules.²⁶

Not only as her father, but as a swordsman, Mutsue saw it as his duty to contain her.

But then—

What of the Ominaeshi she had used on Kamakiri.

And the Hinageshi she used just now.

She was a proven master—but how? If she had never been educated in the Kyotoryu, how could Nanami attain such mastery? But the solution to this paradox was all too simple.

She had been watching—all this time.

She had been watching—all the way.

As her little brother practiced. As her little brother trained.

While Shichika Yasuri—exerted himself.

She had watched the matches between father and son, at times unsubtly,²⁷ and at times from the shade of a tree—never missing a moment, as if stricken with envy.

For nineteen years, Shichika had trained without rest, through rain and wind and snow—and for nineteen years, through rain and wind and snow, Nanami, at rest, had been watching.

Watching.

And learning.²⁸

Studying someone else while they were training, you could learn whatever they were learning, only better—but Nanami had gained the *ability to watch and learn* with unreasonable precision and facility.²⁹

Considering how she had been forced not to exert herself, her ability was inexplicable—an expression of her genius.

To coin a phrase, distance makes the eye grow sharper.

If she saw something once, she remembered every detail.

But if she saw it twice, it was hers.

And the proud and ostentatious Chocho Maniwa had twice already wowed Nanami with his Harlequin Butterfly!

“What, n-no way...”

“Really, I’m jealous, even envious—that you guys can get so serious practicing

at *no more than this.*”

Midair, Nanami reached out her hand.

So sluggishly her movements made no draft—and grabbed the collar of Chocho’s ninja outfit.

Gripped it, and hard.

“Ah!”

“If I’m grabbing you like this, so you can’t get away—no draft can deflect my attack.”

They say first-rate martial artists have a firm grasp of the shortcomings of their techniques. And the weak point of the Harlequin Butterfly was not lost on Nanami, who now embodied it firsthand—

“You’ve made it clear that you won’t talk—and *I’ve seen all I need to see*. I’ll finish you off soon enough. Don’t worry, I’ll bury you all in the same place.”

Chocho opened his mouth—about to speak.

Perhaps to beg for his life.

Or maybe only to scream.

“Kyotoryu—Tampopo.”³⁰

Before any sound could leave his lips, Nanami’s spear hand pierced his beating heart.³¹ In a single instantaneous motion, coming without warning—she’d drawn in the hand gripping his ninja garb to facilitate her spear hand’s rending encounter with the left side of his chest.

She could do without a wind-up or any other prefatory movements.

She was freestyle, this was Form Zero—the Ichijiku.

The two of them fell together to the ground.

Harlequin Butterfly thusly interrupted, they made a violent landing. The impact made Nanami wince—

“N-No way...”

Hacking up phlegmatic blood, Chocho regarded Nanami with utter disbelief.

Shocked at her ability to emulate his Harlequin Butterfly? Not so.

No, quite simply—her spear hand stunned him cold.

“No way a hand—can pierce through someone’s heart... Bullshit, unbelievable. Not only that, my chains...”

Nanami had speared through the chains wrapped around his body as protection—especially for his heart. Even the shard of the Blood Crystal, a remnant of his late friend Kamakiri, which Chocho had slipped into his costume as a last line of defense—was shattered.

Swordless kenpo.

A spear hand driven like a true katana, only more menacing and destructive.

This was the Kyotoryu!

As if reading what was on his mind from his face, Nanami withdrew her spear hand from his ribcage—and let him see her gory fingers.

“The Tampopo is a grappling move,³² a normal spear hand unleashed while you are pulling in the opponent. And when I say normal, I mean normal. It might be able to break flesh, but common sense dictates that it could never go all the way through—unless maybe you’re as strong as Shichika. What you just witnessed, I learned from your friend Kamakiri.”

If you looked closely.

Nanami's fingertips—*were sharp and pointy.*

Nay, not her fingers, but her fingernails.

They had grown into *talons*.

“Wh-Whuh, whuh—”

“He *only showed me this move once*, and only for an instant, which is why I only got two inches out of them. Maybe if I try again, they'll grow a little longer.”

No ninja yields to torture.

Nanami had known this from the start—in which case, why had she bothered chaining Kamakiri to a tree?

And *declined* to tie his arms behind his back?

And finally come so near as to provoke him to attack!

“Ah, ahhhh...”

Chocho—lamented as he writhed.

Writhing in horror—or in rage.

Or perhaps, these were the spasms of a body on the verge of death.

“F-Fending off our Maniwa Ninpo that easily... After all our training, which you can't begin to imagine—impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible!”

“I know—that's why I'm jealous. You guys get to try your very best at such trivial pursuits. I bet you've never pondered the sorrows of people who can do anything, but are unable to give it their all.”

Exhausting what little strength he had, Chocho Maniwa made as though to cling on³³ to Nanami, but she dodged him, deft and swift—noticing the blood

sprayed³⁴ on her kimono as she walked away.

Then—she eyed the body of Chocho, whose life was going up in smoke, without the aid of nicotine.³⁵ All too disinterested, Nanami let out one of her deep sighs.

“Well now...this fight was being watched—but from where? Someplace with a clear view of here...”

¹ 頑なに KATAKUNA NI rigidly ² 泥沼さ DORONUMA SA swampiness; a quagmire ³ がくがく GAKU GAKU onomatopoeia for jerking back and forth ⁴ 泣きどころ NAKIDOKORO “source of tears”

⁵ 拍車をかけ[る] HAKUSHA WO KAKE[RU] spur on ironic, considering her pace ⁶ 絶食 ZESSHOKU fast

⁷ 至極 SHIGOKU “ultimate extreme of”

⁸ 口説き文句 KUDOKI MONKU a pick-up line ⁹ 過去形 KAKOKEI “the bygone form” (of a verb) ¹⁰ 串刺し KUSHIZASHI “kebabbed” 串 KUSHI skewer (n.) 刺す SASU stab, pierce ¹¹ 遠慮会釈なく ENRYO ESHAKU NAKU “without reserve or nods”

¹² 次善の策 JIZEN NO SAKU “next-best” plan ¹³ 暗殺術 ANSATSU JUTSU assassination technique ¹⁴ 指南 SHINAN “finger south” from ancient compasses that did so ¹⁵ 徒手空拳 TOSHU KŪKEN “bare hands, empty fists”

¹⁶ 無構 MUKŌ no stance

¹⁷ 無花果 ICHIJIKU “The Common Fig” or, based on the characters,

“flowerless fruit” 無 MU no (zero) ¹⁸ 雛罌粟 HINAGESHI “The Common Poppy”

¹⁹ 足輕 ASHIGARU foot soldier 足 ASHI leg 軽い KARUI light ²⁰ 無効化 MUKŌKA render ineffective ²¹ 飄々 HYŌ HYŌ aloof contains 風 KAZE wind, and underscores Chocho’s uncanny lightness ²² 申し入れ MŌSHI IRE offer, request ²³ 改造 KAIZŌ “make anew” tune up ²⁴ 正面 SHŌMEN “proper face/side”

²⁵ 指名 SHIMEI “finger name” appoint ²⁶ 反則 HANSOKU foul play ²⁷ 監視役 KANSHIYAKU as monitor 監視 KANSHI surveillance ²⁸ 見稽古 MIGEIKO practicing by observing (a traditional concept and not the author’s neologism) ²⁹ 精度と練度 SEIDO TO RENDO degree of accuracy and level of proficiency ³⁰ 蒲公英 TANPOPO “The Dandelion”

³¹ 心の臓 SHIN NO ZŌ 心臓 SHINZŌ “core organ” heart; archaic with の NO of ³² 組技 KUMI WAZA “wrestling technique” broadly speaking; can involve strikes, as in jujutsu ³³ すがりついてくる SUGARI TSUITE KURU grab at, but also, hug on to ³⁴ 血化粧 CHIGESHŌ “blood makeup”

³⁵ 末期の一服 MATSUGO NO IPPUKU a cigarette before an execution or for a dying man, usu. in fiction (the expression plays on 末期の水 MATSUGO NO MIZU, a funeral rite involving mouthfuls of water)

CHAPTER FOUR

A BILLION
MALADIES





Togame the Schemer liked to say that Hakuhei Sabi, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, the Fallen Swordsman, had been born in the wrong era. And perhaps she was right—here was a man who should have lived during the Age of Warring States. If he had been born in his rightful time—as a contemporary of Kazune Yasuri, the First Master of the Kyotoryu, and Kiki Shikizaki, who over the years forged the thousand Mutant Blades and reigned over the Age of Warring States, it would have changed the course of history—though whether such changes constitute the way things should have been is something else entirely.

Who knows—but if, in the words of Togame, Hakuhei Sabi was a man who had been born in the wrong era, then Nanami Yasuri was a woman who should never have been born.

She had done nothing to reach the top.

Skills that other martial artists acquired only after coughing up their share of blood¹ were hers from the beginning, through no toil whatsoever.

Her strength broke the mold.

Her strength broke the rules.

Surpassing²—what we know as strength.

Which is why the gods punished her.

For being far too superior—



Mitsubachi Maniwa, the last remaining member of the Bug Unit, sprang into action.

All things considered, he had the option to do otherwise—most people, arriving in these circumstances, would certainly have opted to retreat.

He never had expected the sister of the Kyotoryu to be so powerful—“Kamakiri the Head-Hunter” and “Flying Butter Chocho” had met their end one after the other. Mitsubachi may have been a Boss, but he was far less of a ninja than either of the two. He would have done well to back down.

Frankly, Mitsubachi would have, if he could have—after all, their plan to snatch up the sister of the Kyotoryu was in shambles. If they’d known she would be this strong, they’d have chosen a different strategy—and perhaps never come here in the first place.

Hence it would have been perfectly rational to back away for now, and reassess his course of action.

But here is where the fact that they had sailed out to Haphazard Island with no boat backfired³—with Chocho perished, Mitsubachi had no way of returning to the mainland on his own. On an island so densely forested, he could have chopped down trees and built himself a raft, but work like that takes time.

And she already knew that he was here.

Ideally, Nanami assumed that Chocho and Kamakiri were the only two ninjas on the island, and that Chocho was the last of them—but no such luck. If there were two of them, there could be three. He could not allow Nanami to attack him from behind while he was laboring to build his raft.

It seems that his way out had disappeared.

The option of retreating snatched away.

Whether he liked it or not, he was fighting.

And if he was fighting, he had to act fast. The battle between Chocho and Nanami—or to call a spade a spade,⁴ Chocho Maniwa's defeat—had been awful to behold, but in the fashion of a true Maniwa Boss, he had not gone out without a fight.

Allowing Mitsubachi, who had been watching from a distance, to glean some useful information.

When it was over—Nanami knelt down, almost collapsing. Whereupon she started coughing and retching aggressively.

Chocho had failed to do her any harm.

Even that final lunge, where he burned through his remaining energy, had been easy enough for her to dodge—in which case, this was more about her constitution.

Nanami Yasuri had no stamina.⁵

And to boot—her body was in awful shape.

You could say she was in tatters—

So pale and fragile, it had been a sight to see her unveil such a fury, but

although she had not let Chocho hit her even once, this level of exhaustion—did not befit a martial artist.

The fact is—even if Togame the Schemer had been privy to Nanami being so much stronger than her brother, she would likely have not chosen her to join her on her quest. Nanami could not sustain her strength, which made her poorly suited for the journey.

Nanami's infirmity⁶ was fatal.

Even if she won—she could not win forever.

And Mitsubachi Maniwa knew as much.

In which case, he only had to keep it coming.

After fighting Kamakiri and Chocho, she had no chance to shake off her fatigue—by now it had to be consuming her feeble body. To ensure the sacrifice his comrades made was not for nothing, he needed to make haste.

It was just like Chocho had said.

Bug Unit forever. Even in death, their bond would not be severed.

Yet what a shame—thought Mitsubachi.

If only three, or even two more Bosses had come along, surely they could have carried her away, strong as hell as she may be. But five or six of the infamous Bosses of the Maniwa Clan setting off to kidnap a single woman was unthinkable. Unacceptable. Even three was pushing it.

And so, as the last remaining member of the Bug Unit, Mitsubachi had no choice but to battle Nanami Yasuri, imprudent as it may be.

This wasn't supposed to be a battle to the death. It wasn't...

He'd assumed it was part of the groundwork,⁷ the prep work⁸ for seizing the

Mutant Blades from Shichika Yasuri and Togame the Schemer.

Assumed.

“ ... ”

All the same, Mitsubachi was not so foolhardy as to confront his foe triumphantly; he could not beat an enemy who both Kamakiri and Chocho had failed to beat, not when she had *assimilated*⁹ their ninpo.

Kamakiri's Mantis Talons.

Chocho's Harlequin Butterfly.

Mitsubachi had seen her use both, and perfectly, when she dominated Chocho—it was unbelievable, but judging from what he had heard them say, this woman could adopt¹⁰ the moves of her opponents.

He could understand her learning the Harlequin Butterfly—that much was understandable. It was a question of how you walked. Mitsubachi might not be able to cross an ocean, but he could keep it going for a few steps. The Mantis Talons, however, were another story. They demanded conditioning of the physiology.¹¹ How could she make it look so easy, like it was nothing?

What a nightmare.

Komori Maniwa, another of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan, had mastered a move called the Body Melt. It let him morph his flesh to mimic others. But while it allowed him to copy their appearance, their physique, and their abilities, it stopped short of acquiring their moves.

Could this woman do just that?

Chocho paid for the information with his life.

He had to believe it.

He had to accept it.

Physically speaking, this fight would be one-on-one, but it felt like he was up against Kamakiri and Chocho, in addition to Nanami. Essentially, it would be three-on-one. As a Maniwa Boss, Mitsubachi had an aversion to direct confrontation, but this went beyond style. Who wouldn't have been scared of her?

Good thing she was raised on a desert island. With eyes like that, if she'd seen the outside world...

The thought gave him the chills.

Confining her to the island was the right move.

In truth, Nanami had attained *those eyes* because of all those years trapped on Haphazard Island. Mitsubachi had it all wrong, *confinement* had fostered her abilities—but either way.

I have to make a sneak attack.

Finishing her off before she even saw him was the only way. Lucky for him, his ninpo was perfectly suited to this purpose.

Blunderbuzz.¹²

In this move, Mitsubachi flicked caltrops off his thumb as fast as bullets. This use of a ninja weapon ordinarily used when making an escape spoke to Mitsubachi's ingenuity. Flicking a caltrop is not easy—but Mitsubachi boasted one-hundred-percent accuracy. Lest we forget, he was the only member of the Bug Unit brandishing a sword, but in his mind, the blade was only meant for backup.

They called him "Mitsubachi the Sharpshooter."¹³

And the Blunderbuzz—a long-range attack—was his jam.

Its range approached two hundred feet.

Compared to the Mantis Talons and the Harlequin Butterfly, the Blunderbuzz was less theatrical, but in those days, anyone who could attack from a distance had an extreme advantage. And unlike any firearm,¹⁴ the Blunderbuzz neither stank of gunpowder¹⁵ nor made a sound. When Nanami approached Chocho, who could have sworn he was perfectly still, she easily noticed him once she got close enough. By extension, at any greater range...

That woman wouldn't be able to spot me.

Here the Bug Unit's honed senses came in handy.

Unlike Komori Maniwa's Star Cannon, which was considered a success if even half the shuriken made contact, the Blunderbuzz was a targeted-assault¹⁶ smart missile.¹⁷ So long as he fired his caltrops from an undetectable distance, not even she could dodge them. However, you could literally never be too careful with this woman. It was entirely possible that while fighting Kamakiri and Chocho, she had acquired their honed senses. He would shoot her from behind, at the limit of his range—a full two hundred feet away.

His missiles could never miss.

He had the utmost confidence in the precision of the Blunderbuzz.

But the distance would rob the caltrops of their lethality. While they may bite her skin or pierce her flesh, they would never find organ or bone. Feeble as she may be.

Hence the poison.

He would dab the tips with poison.

Not a lethal toxin, more like a tranquilizer. It would be unfair to say it was a cheap move for a ninja, when his enemy was so exceptionally strong and got that way without putting in the effort.

He would have been happy to apply a fatal venom.

To kill her and be done with it.

She was almost too demonic to be of use to him alive. He rightly doubted whether she would be effective as a hostage.

But that would go against both Kamakiri and Chocho's dying wishes—as the last remaining member of the Bug Unit, it was his duty, come what may, to win this battle.

Even if two of them were dead, should one of the three survive, they could claim victory.

The way life goes—for a ninja.

He would live to seize the Shikizaki blades from the Schemer and the Kyotoryu!

“Kamakiri, Chocho—I hope you're watching this.”

Flat on the ground, like a sniper,¹⁸ he prepared his caltrops. Extending one arm long, like the barrel of a rifle¹⁹...

Setting his sights on Nanami Yasuri, slowly approaching, two hundred feet away—after her fight with Chocho, she'd left his body where it had fallen and wandered off—Mitsubachi Maniwa aimed at a spot just above the sash of her kimono.

One-hundred-percent accuracy—meant your mind had to be a steel trap.²⁰ His certainty that he could never miss was in and of itself a kind of handicap.

Wielding these poisoned caltrops, he could off himself by accident if they pricked his fingers or his palm in his excessively firm grip.

He only had one shot.

With the poison, he need not focus on her vital organs. Anywhere he hit would be sufficient. If he aimed for her torso, he would never miss—but if somehow he did, she would notice the direction the projectile had come from, and instantly close in. Sickly as she may be, she had mastered the Harlequin Butterfly. There would nary be time to ready²¹ the next caltrop.

Considering how adroitly she had speared her hand through Chocho's chest, this woman had no qualms about killing. Raised here on the island, she was obviously not a veteran fighter, but her strike had been sure, as it must have been too when she slayed Kamakiri.

Thus.

One-hundred-percent accuracy was not enough.

He had to stop her—with a single shot.

But do I have what it takes?

Of course I do.

I'm a Boss—same as Kamakiri and Chocho.

"Blunderbuzz."

Summoning the pride of the Maniwa.

A caltrop slathered in nerve agent soared through the air—heading for Nanami's back.



Which brings us to our third reminiscence.

The last of three.

This time, deep into the past.

Not one year—not even twenty years.

But further back.

Before they were marooned.

Nanami Yasuri was bedridden.²²

Her body was burning, consumed with pain. But for all her suffering, she could not so much as bend her pinky finger. Noise crashing through her mind without relief, she could not even open her eyes. As if the pain of the entire world were trapped in her tiny frame.

She could die any time.

She heard the doctor say so, at her bedside.²³

He must have thought Nanami was unconscious.

Any time. Still... the doctor went on.

Shaking his head, voice filled with wonder.

I don't understand why she hasn't died. How is the girl...alive?

Here her memory cuts off. Static, like a sandstorm, fills the screen—roaring

snow, as if the thing were busted. But eventually, the picture comes together²⁴—into focus.

Poor thing.

A voice came through the noise.

The voice of a woman.

Nanami knew immediately this was her mother—her mother was beside her. What happened to the doctor?

And her father.

And her brother—where did they go?

Where was everybody?

Everybody but her mother.

You poor thing.

She spoke like she was talking to herself.

Maybe she was talking to herself.

At this point, no one could possibly believe that Nanami was still conscious. Nanami, herself, whose entire body was beset with pain, failed to understand why she had not lost consciousness.

What a relief it would have been to lose awareness.

Or even die.

If only.

What an incredible relief.

My poor little baby.

The same thing—over and over.

Poor thing, my baby.

If only you could die, it would be over.

Poor thing.

Her memory cuts off again. Fog darkens all—but remember, her fever was so high that she could not open her eyes. Her memory lacked any visual component. Just voices. Whether her mother was even really there, she could not say. Her ears could have been hearing things,²⁵ in the throes of her pain.

She was not even sure this was a memory.

Moreover, her mother... *I wish I could forget everything about her—because of her, we wound up stranded on this island.* It was *her* fault.

Enough reminiscing—



She sensed the caltrop cutting through the air, just in time to turn around—but when she did, it nailed her in the middle of the chest.

Tearing her kimono, its barbs²⁶ bit into the skin of her stomach.

It was already too late to act. Mitsubachi Maniwa used a special kind of caltrop for the Blunderbuzz. Each of the arms was fashioned like a fishhook. Once in, they were not easy to remove. Unless you were extremely careful, they

would snag your fingers. And while she dillydallied²⁷ with the barbs—the poison would course through her veins.

Nanami staggered, almost falling.

She just managed to catch herself, but her gait was clearly wobbly.

“...”

And yet—she took pains to pinpoint where the caltrop came from. Her gaze was calm, not what you would expect from someone who has just been sniped.²⁸ Since she was normally so pale, it was impossible to tell whether the poison was working, but doubtless it was spreading from her stomach through her body.

“Is someone...there?”

In answer to Nanami’s feeble cry, Mitsubachi Maniwa stepped proudly from the stand of trees.²⁹

Brandishing another caltrop, just in case.

Poised to fire again if Nanami did anything suspicious—this caltrop of course being poisoned like the first.

“I am Mitsubachi Maniwa—one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan.”

“Hi. I’m Nanami Yasuri.”

Compared to Mitsubachi, Nanami was terse. Had her tongue been snared³⁰ with poison?

“I see you’ve taken care of my two friends.”

“Yes...” Nanami spoke slowly, scanning the area around her. “I gave them a proper killing—Kamakiri and Chocho?”

“Ha ha ha.” This made Mitsubachi laugh. “You can stop looking around. I’m the last one—but in the state you’re in, one of us should do just fine.”

“Is this...poisoned?”

“Yes—poison.”

Mitsubachi was ready for action—he held himself like he had won already, but spoke with his sight³¹ trained squarely on Nanami.

“Don’t worry. It’s not strong enough to kill you. Just enough to make you sleepy. I suppose Kamakiri and Chocho mentioned that we’re not interested in you—we want your brother. Specifically, the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki he’s collected.”

“...”

“Trust me, part of me would love to kill you, but that would soothe my own regrets³² only, for haplessly letting my friends get murdered. To settle the score for Kamakiri and Chocho, I have to obtain those swords.”

“You...talk too much.” Unsteady as she was, Nanami backed away—and by leaning on a tree, she kept herself upright, without ever taking a knee. “So it’s when people have the upper hand that they tend to wax loquacious.³³ And I suppose ninjas...are no exception.”

“...?”

Was her remark a nod to how Kamakiri had refused to speak, even when she tortured him? To Chocho’s refusal, before their battle, to convey how many more ninjas remained? To be sure, Mitsubachi had said more than strictly necessary. But what of it? At this stage, it wasn’t as if he were divulging any secret. To begin with...

“Your point—is just common sense. You made it like it’s some novel insight,³⁴ when it’s not.”

“Please understand—over the last twenty years, I’ve met only a few people... I’m still confused by human behavior. There’s so many things I’ve never had a chance to do.”





“You sure are brave,”³⁵ said Mitsubachi in a low voice. “It may not be lethal, but this much poison should at least have shut you up by now—maybe I should slip you another, for good measure.”

He aimed his caltrop.

Made a show of it—to terrorize her.

They were about ten feet apart.

Weak as she may be, she was still standing, which made it risky to get any closer. Not when she could come at him with the Mantis Talons or whatever else.

But ten feet—was plenty close.

At that range, the Blunderbuzz would murder anybody. If he did not exercise the utmost caution and restraint, the caltrop was liable to blow straight through her belly.

“Was that—your ninpo?”

“Yeah, it’s called the Blunderbuzz.”

“Ha...haha.”

Nanami smiled—a pained and artificial smile.

Weak as she may be, it was an evil smile.

“You’re fine with—*showing me* your ninpo?”

So she knew he’d watched her fight with Chocho—the way she said it made that clear, but at this point it was irrelevant. “In your condition, I’m fine with you seeing whatever you want. Even if you were a genius of unparalleled, unmentionable ability, you could never execute the Blunderbuzz.”

Ready, aim—his sights were set.

“Unlike Kamakiri’s Mantis Talons or Chocho’s Harlequin Butterfly, this move demands that you have caltrops—even if you learned it, you couldn’t use it, since you have no ammo. Don’t tell me that thanks to an unshared character detail,³⁶ you happen to have some caltrops up your sleeve.”

“...”

“You think you’re so strong, Nanami Yasuri—but in your sorry state, the threat is empty.”

“When did I ever say I was strong?” Nanami blustered. “It’s just that you guys—are weak.”

“Hah, I’ll take that as another empty threat... Look, if you’re done needlessly resisting, I promise to stop needlessly harassing you. If you’ll be a good girl and let me hold you hostage from your brother, I have no reason to bother you. I’m a man, after all. I’d hate³⁷ to mar your pretty skin.”

“Thanks—so much.”

After Nanami spoke—she moved.

Or rather, went to move.

She was about to make a beeline for Mitsubachi, when she was stymied by a stealthy Blunderbuzz. Had it not stopped her, it would certainly have tripped her from the outset, the only question being whether her body would have made it to his feet—but Mitsubachi did not even let her falter forward.

Her second caltrop to the stomach.

Savaging her kimono, ravaging her skin, and digging deep into her flesh—the blast slammed Nanami back into the tree.

“Guh...”

Such was the breath that leaked from her throat.

Completely losing her posture, and apparently unable to remain upright, she slumped down by the roots of the tree.

Her bleary, vacant³⁸ gaze—cast upon Mitsubachi.

“... ..”

“Looks like I finally shut you up,” the ninja said, declining to prepare another caltrop. Why bother? Besides, even if the nerve agent was nonlethal, three doses would be going overboard for anyone, especially somebody as sickly and infirm as Nanami. If he were to hit her again, he’d need to wash off the poison—

No, he had a better idea.

In a single breath, Mitsubachi drew the longsword at his hip.

“... ..”

Nanami was breathing violently. Still, the flashing blade failed to elicit a reaction. This time, her eyes were open, but she could have been unconscious—at the very least, Mitsubachi believed, her thoughts were thick as mud.

Poison and illness will take down even the greatest.³⁹

No doubt.

“You might be behaving now, but when the poison wears off, we’ll be back to square one.⁴⁰ Let’s be real, you pack more of a punch than me. So how about—while you’re still sleepy, I cut off both your arms, to make sure you never punch again?”

“ ...”

“I doubt that it will even hurt. I’ve no desire to torment a downed foe—the poison works wonders as a painkiller. And don’t hold this against me. It’s your fault, for being so strong...so strong, that I’m in no mood to at least spare one arm. I can’t take any chances—”

Mitsubachi raised his longsword and approached Nanami, hunched down by the tree roots. She remained unresponsive—even seeing Mitsubachi with his sword on high.⁴¹

“Haaa!” the ninja bellowed—and let his longsword fall. Ready to chop straight through her arm, into the tree trunk at her back!

“...?!”

He chopped through.

Something.

But the thing his sword chopped through—was indeed the tree. The blade slashed the trunk clear down to its roots, but that was all. While it is true that esoteric tricks of swordsmanship exist for cutting not the target, but the thing behind it, Mitsubachi Maniwa, who never claimed to be a swordsman, could hardly pull such a stunt.

In which case, what of Nanami Yasuri?

When Mitsubachi cleared his head enough to think this far—it was too late. A sharp pain ran through his shoulder. He looked—to find *a caltrop buried past its barb.*

Savaging his ninja garb, ravaging his skin, and digging deep into his flesh.

“Whah, ugh...”

Nearly falling to his feet from all the pain, Mitsubachi summoned enough strength to turn around—whereupon he saw Nanami, slouching—not leaning against anything, or propped up against anything, and definitely not in any kind of stance... But then again, she had a name for standing this way, with her arms hanging at her sides:

Kyotoryu Form Zero—the Ichijiku.

“Wh-Wh-When did you get behind—”

“Harlequin Butterfly,” Nanami answered quietly—taking the time to sigh. “... That, and some Kyotoryu footwork, for good measure. Not exactly instantaneous,⁴² but using both at once, I guess I can go pretty fast—that’s how. Oh, and another thing.”

Nanami held up her right hand and flicked her thumb smartly at Mitsubachi.

“What did you call it, the Blunderbuzz?”

“How...”

Considering the caltrop lodged into his shoulder—the time had passed for asking questions and being surprised by the answers. As should be clear by now, Nanami dodged Mitsubachi’s longsword almost instantaneously before countering—with none other than the Blunderbuzz!

“What, so you had a caltrop all along—conveniently enough? Did I just miss the part where they told us you have some on you?”

“You gave them to me—both of them.”

Nanami stopped flicking her thumb and showed him her kimono. The caltrops had torn through the fabric—*but only one was there*.

The other caltrop, the first Mitsubachi had unleashed, was gone.

“This Blunderbuzz—it’s great that you can attack from so far away, but it’s too bad that *with each attack*, you give your enemy your ammo.”

“Wha... B-But! Once they break skin, they should be almost impossible to remove! What about the barb—”

“You see...”

This time Nanami showed him her left hand.

Its nails—were much longer than they should be.

Almost like blades.

Mantis Talons—

“I gouged it free, skin and all.”

“...!”

Mitsubachi’s head began to spin.

The shock of hearing that Nanami had gouged into her own flesh was incredible enough—but there was more. If this was the same caltrop that he threw at her, then it was poisoned, and now that toxin was traveling through his body!

“H-How could... How did... When you only saw the Blunderbuzz—me, do it once...”

“Okay—not like this is a compliment, but that is not an easy move. I was aiming for the center of your back, but it strayed way up and to the right...and even this close, it had less force than I wanted. Surprisingly hard to do. I wish I could have seen it twice.”

“Gah, ahh—”

Words failed Mitsubachi.

Perhaps it was the poison, perhaps it was frustration⁴³—

His body would not do his bidding.

No, wait, stick with it—don't lose focus. The battle isn't over yet. Nanami may have hit me with a caltrop, but she missed my vital organs, and after gouging out that caltrop with her nails, she's gotta be in rough shape. I got a dose of poison, but she got double-dosed, far too much for a girl her size. I'm winning, no matter how you look at it—

“Huh?”

Mitsubachi Maniwa finally wised up.

The poison, what happened to the poison?

Not the Harlequin Butterfly, not the Kyotoryu footwork, and not the Mantis Talons or the Blunderbuzz—none of it should have been possible for somebody stung twice by poisoned caltrops!

She had been about to faint!

In so much pain—what happened to the pain?

“I faked it.”

Nanami spoke plainly, and unapologetically.⁴⁴

“A poison that can't even kill? That's nothing for me. I knew you guys were trying to capture me alive. You never would have used a poison strong enough to hurt me.”

“Whuh...”

What the hell... Was she saying that she could have dodged both of the

caltrops but let them hit her anyway? Was she insinuating she had feigned exhaustion just so he'd lower his guard?!

To see the Blunderbuzz up close and personal.

To get Mitsubachi Maniwa to talk.

Was she really telling him that she had tricked him, to make sure Mitsubachi was the third and final ninja on the island?

“Ugh...ahwah, ah, ah, uwahhh.”

Tongue-tied.

The poison certainly worked.

How could she call it *nothing*? That simply couldn't be. Even if she was a genius of unparalleled, unmentionable ability...poison and illness will take down even the greatest! Indeed, after absorbing but a single caltrop's share, Mitsubachi was in such pain he felt his body being torn apart!

“*Torn apart...*” said Nanami, using the nails of her left hand to gouge out the second caltrop, skin and all.

Gouging her nails into her own flesh.

No change to her expression whatsoever.

“*That's nothing—I feel that way every day.*”

“...”

“Like you said, the poison *worked wonders as a painkiller*—pain and suffering are old friends of mine by now. *A little more can't hurt*—literally. Even if it does itch a little.”

Nanami Yasuri—a woman who should never have been born.

She'd done nothing to reach the top.

Skills other martial artists acquired only after coughing up their share of blood were hers to embody, through no toil whatsoever.

Her strength broke the mold.

Her strength broke the rules.

Surpassing—what we know as strength.

Which is why the gods punished her.

For being far too superior—they saddled her body with a billion maladies.⁴⁵ Her body was gratuitously⁴⁶ packed with these afflictions, each plenty fatal on its own—and inviting a whole suite of complications⁴⁷ that made her life gratuitously excruciating.

Yet her innate genius rejected the maladies.

Rejected poison, and illness.

Through all the pain and suffering, even on the verge of death, her body refused to die. She could not get any weaker, and was too feeble to function—but held out, living on the brink of death.

She should have died by now.

She should not—have been alive.

Her body possessed an outsize⁴⁸ capacity to heal, keeping her billion maladies at bay.

The gouges in her belly skin—would soon be gone without a trace.

Mitsubachi understood now.

How despite her inexperience, she had been able to kill Kamakiri and

Chocho—for her, pain and suffering, and likewise death, were old friends.

Dying and killing.

And being killed.

Had never been a big deal.

“Really, I’m jealous of you guys.”

Careful not to cut her palms, and playing with the caltrop she’d *gouged out safely*—she glanced at Mitsubachi.

“*You guys can take your health for granted*—that makes me incredibly jealous. I never asked for my abilities. All I’ve ever wanted is a healthy body, and a little room—to dream.”

Her body kept her dreams from coming true.

Her abilities rendered dreams unnecessary.

And either—she could have done without.

“Kah...aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

All Mitsubachi Maniwa could do was howl into the sky with all his might. Crying out—for Kamakiri and Chocho; for Komori, buried in the island dirt; and for Shirasagi and Kuizame, who had sacrificed their lives at other locales on the Sword Hunt.

“Not over yet! I haven’t lost—you’re not the only person with an extreme tolerance for poison! I’m not done fighting—you’re not going to psyche me out! If you think I’m finished, you got another thing coming!”

“No—I’m pretty sure you’re finished.”

His desperate cry was lost on Nanami Yasuri.

“The caltrop that I planted in your shoulder—” she explained, “was dressed with more than just your poison. I freshened it *with poison of another kind.*”

“...!”

“I got it from *the first ninja who attacked me*—Kamakiri. He had it stashed in his molar... Looks like I had a few tricks up my sleeve, after all. Did you see that coming? A ninja, dying by the poison of his brethren. Quite the tidy ending, if you ask me.”

“Ah...ahh....ahhhh...”

A lethal poison—their Suicide Poison.

Which meant—he was already dead.

Out of his body, out of his mind.

Faced with inescapable despair, Mitsubachi turned pale.

And yet—pale as he was, he paled in comparison to Nanami.

Whose skin had such little color—she should not have been alive.

“I’d prefer to let you choose,” Nanami told Mitsubachi, who refused to break form, or perhaps was simply dumbfounded, and powerless to act—“whether to die by poison, or by the sword.”

“...”

“There’s a move that I’ve been dying to try out—I only *watched him do it once* before he left the island, and never actually tried it out myself...but you choose. Doesn’t matter to me either way.”

In response.

Mitsubachi Maniwa gave her a fake-looking smile—but answered without

flinching.

“You can kill me with a sword,” he said. “If you kill me with our Suicide Poison, I could never face my friends... I’d appreciate if you would bury me beside them.”

“I would be happy to.”

Nanami tossed the caltrop like a piece of litter⁴⁹—and arms hanging at her sides, totally natural, she slowly made her way toward Mitsubachi, who could only wait for judgment. He wasn’t interested in making any last-ditch effort⁵⁰—why bother, with no friend left on the island to watch?

“The Kyotoryu has Seven Fatal Orchids—but with this move, I’ll give you all of them at once—it’s basically the eighth one, or the Last Fatal Orchid—”

Fatal Orchid One: Kyoka Suigetsu

Fatal Orchid Two: Kacho Fugetsu

Fatal Orchid Three: Hyakka Ryoran

Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako

Fatal Orchid Five: Hika Rakuyo

Fatal Orchid Six: Kinjo Tenka

Fatal Orchid Seven: Rakka Rozeki

“Kyotoryu—Shichika Hachiretsu!”

Bug Unit Maniwa—exterminated from Haphazard Island.

Flying like a butterfly, stinging like a bee, and preying like a mantis—they were crushed like bugs.

Since these battles had taken place on a desert island, it goes without saying that it was quite some time before the news made it to the mainland—but the sudden loss of three of the Twelve Bosses would have a major impact on the Maniwa Clan, and on the Sword Hunt being carried out by Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri.

Reason being—

“...”

Nanami Yasuri—stood on the beach.

Her kimono smeared with blood and full of holes.

She had looked weak enough already, but now she looked ghastly⁵¹ and depleted—in her feeble state, fighting for her life three times in a row had been like walking a tightrope.⁵²

She may have won three times in a row, but that did not mean that the battles had been easy. Mitsubachi had thought he could have licked her with the help of two more Bosses, but in reality, she would have been in trouble if even one more Maniwa Boss-level opponent had shown up. It was a miracle she was not hacking blood up this very moment.

She gazed over the sea.

Across the ocean—to the mainland.

To the nation of Japan—where her little brother and that Whitehaired

Schemer were hunting for swords.

“I saw one, finally, after all this time—”

She eyed the longsword, in its scabbard, she was carrying in one hand—and let out a sigh from the bottom of her heart.

The longsword—of Mitsubachi Maniwa.

Indeed, Nanami had been watching.

She’d seen him swing the sword, aimed for her arm, and seen him slash the tree behind her clear down to its roots.

Seen it.

Seen what it could do.

“I’m supposed to be part of the Kyotoryu...but now I understand—*how to use a sword.*”

On this island where all blades were prohibited, nearly twenty years after Nanami had gained the ability to watch and learn, she had finally seen a sword in action.⁵³

And not merely by coincidence.

Just as she had pretended to torture Kamakiri Maniwa to make him use his Mantis Talons—and just as she had provoked Mitsubachi to fire another Blunderbuzz—

Nanami had lured him into brandishing his sword.

Was the Kyotoryu stronger for being swordless?

Three months before the Bug Unit landed on the island, Komori Maniwa had asked something to that effect:

If the Swordless Swordsman took up a sword...he would have to be stronger than the same swordsman swordless.

By a strange twist, the dictum came true now, via the head of the Yasuri household.

Her genius—reached an even higher echelon of genius.

Then.

“Oh, Shichika... What Last Fatal Orchid? He can really run his mouth⁵⁴... It has such a glaring weakness I have a hard time even calling it fatal. I should have told him, but you never know until you try... If I don’t warn him soon, he could wind up in deep trouble—actually, no.”

Nanami tilted her head, as if unsure of what to do.

And gazed off to the horizon.

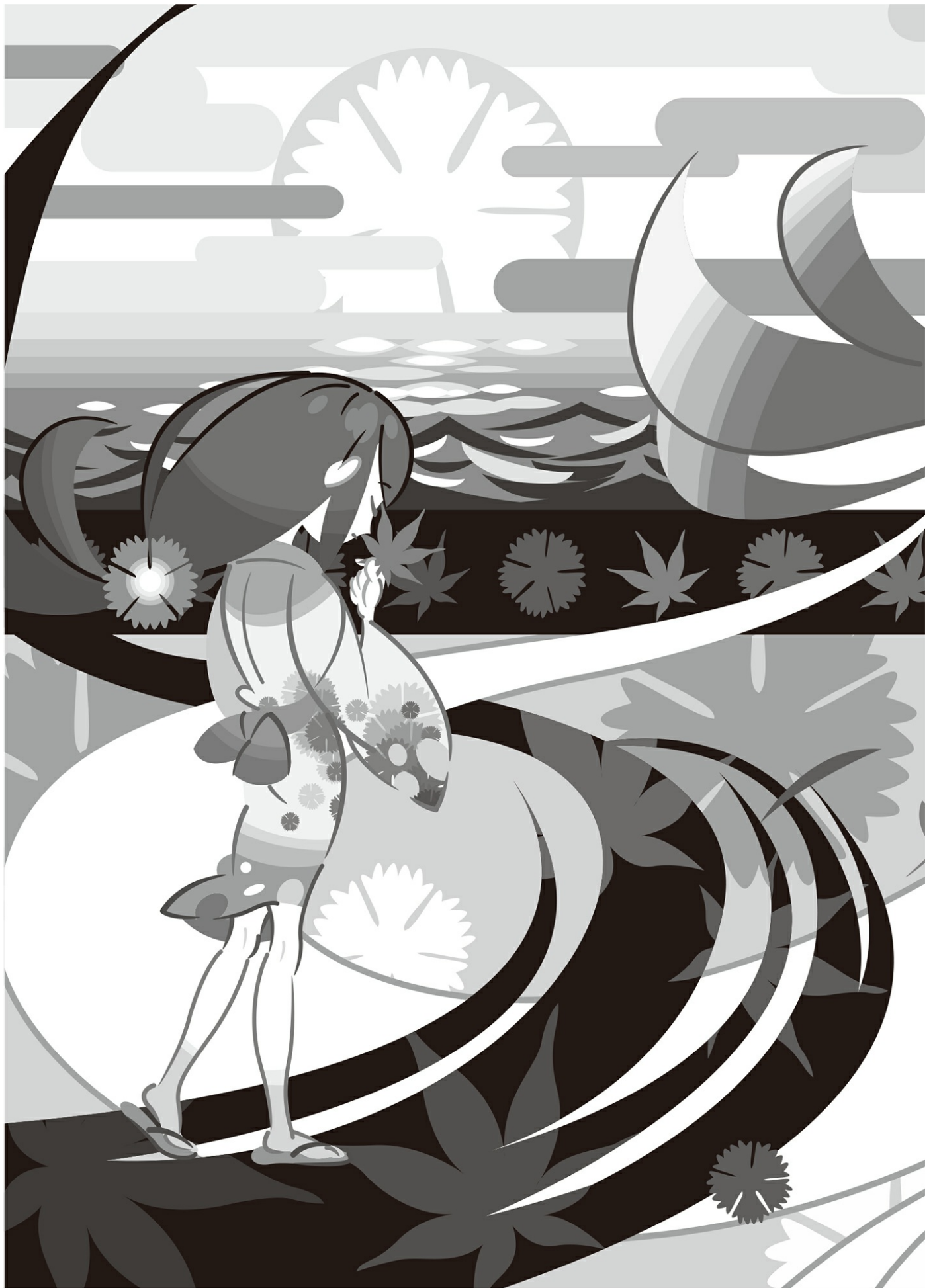
Another deep, deep sigh.

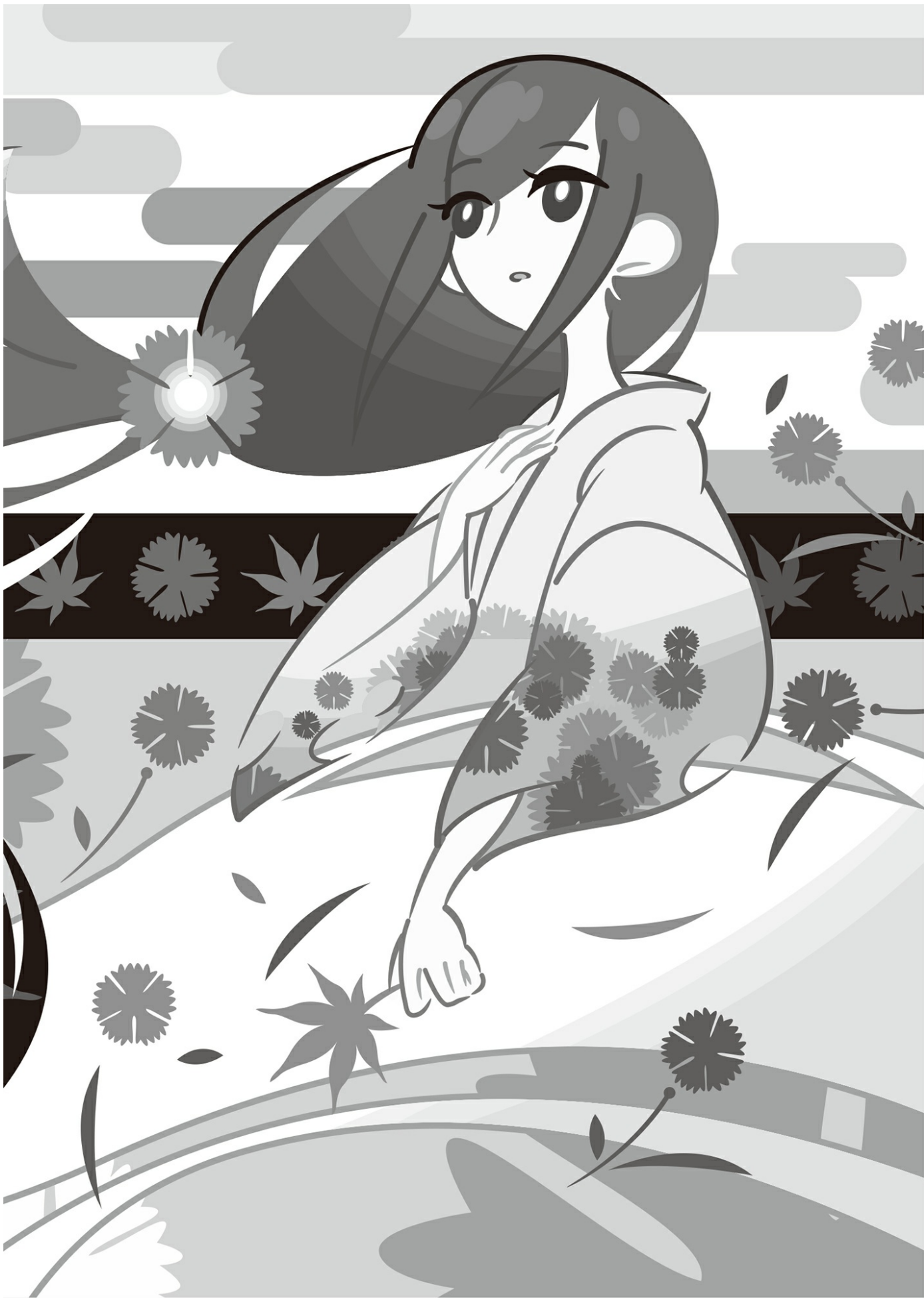
She could sigh—better than anyone.

Then she muttered something.

Wearing an evil smile.

“There’s room for one more—on this Sword Hunt.”





¹ 血反吐 CHIHEDO “blood vomit”

² 最早 MOHAYA no longer

³ 裏目に出た Urame ni deta turn up the reverse side (of a die) ⁴ 露骨に ROKOTSU ni “bone exposing-ly”

⁵ 体力 TAIRYOKU endurance 体 TAI/KARADA body 力 RYOKU/CHIKARA power ⁶ 虚弱さ KYOJAKU SA frailty 虚 KYO empty (as in 虚刀流 KYOTORYŪ) and 弱 JAKU weak ⁷ 下地作り SHITAJI ZUKURI laying foundation

⁸ 下ごしらえ SHITA GOSHIRAE preliminary measures ⁹ 吸収 KYŪSHŪ absorb

¹⁰ 憶える OBOERU commit to memory

¹¹ 人体生理 JINTAI SEIRI “the human body’s life-workings”

¹² 忍法撒菱指弾 NINPŌ MAKIBISHI SHIDAN Ninpo Caltrop Finger-Shot

¹³ 刺々 TOGE TOGE thorny, prickly

¹⁴ 鉄砲 TEPPŌ “iron cannon”

¹⁵ 火薬 KAYAKU “fire drug”

¹⁶ 一点突破 ITTEN TOPPA breaking through a point (of a defense line) ¹⁷ 精密射撃 SEIMITSU SHAGEKI precision shooting ¹⁸ 伏撃の姿勢 FUKUGEKI NO SHISEI “ambush posture”

¹⁹ 銃身 JŪSHIN “gun body”

²⁰ 強靱な精神 KYŌJIN NA SEISHIN resilient/tenacious spirit ²¹ 装填 SŌTEN load (a rifle)

- ²² 臥せっていた FUSETTE ITA lying prone (with illness) ²³ 枕元 MAKURA MOTO by the pillow
- ²⁴ 紡がれていく TSUMUGARETE IKU get woven
- ²⁵ 幻聴 GENCHŌ auditory hallucination 幻 GEN/MABOROSHI mirage 聴く KIKU to listen ²⁶ 棘 TOGE spines
- ²⁷ もたもた MOTA MOTA onomatopoeia for clumsy, feckless movement
- ²⁸ 狙撃 SOGEKI “aimed strike” sharpshooting (usu. military) ²⁹ 木々 KIGI “tree dittoed”
- ³⁰ 覚束無く OBOTSUKANAKU made unsteady
- ³¹ 撒菱の照準 MAKIBISHI NO SHŌJUN the caltrop’s aim 照準 SHŌJUN sights (of a gun) ³² 晴れる[...]無念 HARERU[...]MUNEN vindicate; avenge; settle a score (as in the next sentence) ³³ 饒舌になる JŌZETSU NI NARU to become “rich-tongued”
- ³⁴ 新発見 SHIN’HAKKEN new discovery
- ³⁵ 気丈 KIJŌ stout-hearted; tough mentally rather than physically ³⁶ 裏設定 URA SETTEI “behind (stage) setting” production notes, i.e., equally meta in the original ³⁷ 忍びない SHINOBI NAI “can’t bear” puns on 忍び SHINOBI alternate term for ninja ³⁸ うつろ UTSURO empty often written 虚ろ UTSURO (first character in 虚刀流 KYOTŌRYŪ) ³⁹ 達人 TATSUJIN expert, master
- ⁴⁰ 元の木阿弥 MOTO NO MOKUAMI previous state/condition (that is not desirable to return to) 木阿弥 Warring States-era body double who eventually reverted to his unimportant self ⁴¹ 大上段 DAIJŌDAN holding a

sword over your head ⁴² 瞬間移動 SHUNKAN IDŌ “momentary movement” teleportation ⁴³ 悔しさ KUYASHISA anguish vs. 後悔 KŌKAI “late anguish” regret ⁴⁴ 悪びれもせず WARUBIRE MO SEZU without enacting any remorse or compunction ⁴⁵ 一億の病魔 ICHIOKU NO BYŌMA a hundred million sicknesses ⁴⁶ 遠慮忌憚なく ENRYO KITAN NAKU without pause or restraint ⁴⁷ 合併症 GAPPEISHŌ “combined/merged medical condition”

⁴⁸ 桁外れ KETA HAZURE wrong number of digits, “missing a zero”

⁴⁹ ぽいっと POITTO onomatopoeia for throwing casually, carelessly ⁵⁰ 悪足掻き WARU AGAKI struggle in vain

⁵¹ げっそり GESSORI onomatopoeia for losing masses of flesh, or emaciation, enervation ⁵² 綱渡り TSUNA WATARI “crossing a rope” i.e., it has the same figurative sense in Japanese ⁵³ 実演 JITSU’EN performance (vs. rehearsal) ⁵⁴ 大口を叩く ŌGUCHI WO TATAKU “talk big” boast





The fourth moon was on its way out.

A conspicuous duo showed up at an anchorage¹ in Buzen, down in Kyushu. One dressed herself in garish finery, hair swinging on the sea breeze. The other was a mountain of a man, stripped to the waist, hair knotted at his neck—you would never find a stranger pair across all of Japan.

Togame the Schemer, and Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

They were staring quietly at the sea, looking like a couple of people who had accomplished something big. The way they held themselves intimated a maturity they had not possessed just recently, in Suo.

“Anyway, that was a pretty tough fight,” said Togame, starting things off.

“Sure was,” Shichika answered with feeling. “Now I know why they called him the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—probably my toughest battle yet. Hakuhei Sabi—I’ll never forget that name as long as I live.”

“Yeah—that was the closest² victory imaginable. I would even go so far as to say that the sacred grounds of Ganryu Island have renewed their place in history...”

“I won by the skin³ of my teeth. If it wasn’t for your strategies, Togame, I probably wouldn’t be alive.”

“Come now, my schemes would never have worked without your moves. Although I have to say, I was not expecting things to actually go according to plan. You impress me, Shichika.”

“I fell for you all over again, Togame.”

“Come on, come on. What matters is, you faced off against Hakuhei Sabi, and won. Which means you’ve made yourself⁴ the Strongest in Japan, in deed and in name.”

“Strongest in Japan... Well, I can’t say it’s sinking in. I was stunned by all those moves that Sabi laid on me. From the get-go, that Imploding Ground⁵ of his blew me away. I never thought I would see footwork swifter than the Kakitsubata—”

“The move that struck me most was the Nightmare,⁶ where he stopped you with his guard and scabbard. They say that move earned him the title of Sword Saint, and now I can see why.”

“No way. It’s gotta be that weird move, the Flashback,⁷ where the sword’s length alters at will, really messes with the Kyotoryu—it’s hard to take your distance,⁸ even though the blade is held at a fixed position. Or maybe the Katana Jackpot,⁹ his own version of iainuki, so unlike Ginkaku Uneri’s Zerosen—it scares the crap out of me to think what would have happened if I hadn’t lost my footing at just the right time...”

“Yes, but that block he executed, the Bladeholder,¹⁰ where he read the cutting edge of your hand like an open book, was truly superb. For a second, I thought you were done for. For a boy of only twenty, built more or less the same as me, to move like that—you may have beat him, Shichika, but I dare say we enjoyed but a taste of what the Fallen Swordsman had to offer.”

“Yeah. To be honest, I don’t feel like I won—it just isn’t sinking in. I’m not sure I can even say that I got lucky, sad as that sounds.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Togame said. “All we can say is that we didn’t lose.”

“But obviously the best part was the Whisper Eureka,¹¹ a move he could have only done with Hakuto the Whisper. Another of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki. At first glance, the only thing the Whisper had going for it was its beauty. I never would have dreamed a sword so brittle could have that kind of play or power. Some people say that any hunk of metal¹² becomes a legend in the right hands, but this is another story—I feel like I finally understand the horrible potential of the sword.”

“So true,” said Togame. “Frankly, I never believed the legends saying Sabi could cut down the sun floating in the sky, if he so chose—but I’m afraid we underestimated him. With moves like that, he probably could have done it—regardless! regardless! Past is past, but at the end of the day, we took possession of the Whisper... And it was from Form Three, the Tsutsuji,¹³ that you unleashed Fatal Orchid Three: Hyakka Ryoran—this time I finally saw it with my own eyes! You faced off against Hakuhei Sabi, and you cut him down. That is something to be proud of!”

“I guess so. Otherwise, Sabi would never rest in peace—still, I can’t stop thinking about what he said before he died... After all, it was his last farewell. What the heck did he mean when he called me, or the Kyotoryu, a memento left by legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki? What was that about the Kiki Pedigree¹⁴... Sabi called himself a reject¹⁵—but wasn’t the venom of the swords what made him stab you in the back?”

“Hard to say—the venom got him, to be sure, but Sabi had a way about him, and there may well have been extenuating circumstances we could never have

imagined...and if we can go by what he said, those reasons will come to light for us along the way.”

“Yeah. Well, we managed to capture Hakuto the Whisper¹⁶ in pristine condition, no breakage or damage, not even a scratch—which means that we have four of the Twelve Possessed. Feels like the end’s in sight.”

“I know what you mean, but don’t get too excited, Shichika. Our journey has only just begun—since we’re already in Kyushu, why not keep the ball rolling and capture another of the Twelve Possessed.”

“Sure, makes sense. No objections here.”

They bumped arms, forcefully—proof a bond had formed between them, and of the kind only enjoyed by survivors of the same horrific battlefield. An aura of ennoblement wafting from them, their backs positively looking larger, Togame and Shichika left the anchorage behind them—

This time, heading for Satsuma.

Seeking Zokuto the Armor, a sword unparalleled in armor class.¹⁷

Its owner was the captain of a pirate ship—the Schemer and the Kyotoryu would be taken beyond the preamble of their Sword Hunt, and straight into the middle stages of the game.

Nevertheless, Shichika was unable to let it go.

Hakuhei Sabi, Strongest in Japan?

They had never seen his sister.

Thus did Shichika Yasuri vanquish Hakuhei Sabi, making himself the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, in deed and in name—that is, so long as *she* stayed off the mainland.

Nanami Yasuri, Head of the House of Yasuri.

In three months, she would appear before her brother, wielding one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki—Akuto the Eel, said to be the most atrocious blade of all.

Hakuto the Whisper: Check

End of Book Four

To Be Continued

- ¹ 船着場 FUNATSUKIBA landing (for a vessel)
- ² 紙一重 KAMI HITOE paper-thin (margin) 紙 KAMI paper 一重 HITOE one layer
- ³ 首の皮一枚 KUBI NO KAWA ICHIMAI “single sheet of neck skin”
- ⁴ 襲名 SHŪMEI take over the name (usually of one’s master)
- ⁵ 爆縮地 BAKUSHUKUCHI neologism that combines two words whose senses suggest such an elision: 爆縮 BAKUSHUKU implode & 縮地 SHUKUCHI shorten distance; 地 CHI/JI ground; background
- ⁶ 逆転夢斬 GYAKUTEN MUZAN “reverse dream slash” pun on 逆転無惨 GYAKUTEN MUZAN “brutal reversal”
- ⁷ 速遅剣 SOKUCHIKEN “fast-slow sword” pun on 測地 SOKUCHI land survey
- ⁸ 間合い MA’AI space shared between opponents
- ⁹ 一揆刀銭 IKKI TŌSEN 一揆 IKKI uprising 刀銭 TŌSEN blade-shaped currency once circulated in China pun on 一騎当千 IKKI TŌSEN a single horseman worth a thousand (troops)
- ¹⁰ 刃取り JINTORI “blade taking” pun on 陣取り JINTORI securing a location; Prisoner’s Base
- ¹¹ 薄刀開眼 HAKUTŌ KAIGAN “Epiphany of the Whisper” 開眼 KAIGAN open one’s eyes, figuratively

12 なまくら NAMAKURA dull sword phonetic spelling of 鈍 NAMAKURA
Book Two's Mutant Blade

13 躑躅 TSUTSUJI "The Azalea"

14 記紀の血統 KIKI NO KETTŌ blood line of 記紀 KIKI the swordsmith's
name, but also "chronicles"

15 出来損ないの失敗作 DEKISOKONAI NO SHIPPAISAKU defective,
botched work

16 薄刀 針 HAKUTŌ HARI "The Thin Katana: Needle"

17 絶対無双の防御力 ZETTAI MUSŌ NO BŌGYORYOKU absolutely unique
defensive power

CHARACTER
INDEX 4

HAKUHEI SABI



AGE	Twenty
OCCUPATION	Fallen Swordman
AFFILIATION	None
STATUS	Ronin
POSSESSED	Hakuto the Whisper
HEIGHT	5' 4"
WEIGHT	103 lbs.
HOBBY	Swordplay

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

IMPLoding GROUND	⇨⇨⇨⇨ KICK
FRIGHTMARE	⇧ (HOLD) ⇩ SLASH
FLASHBACK	⇨⇨⇩ THRUST
BLADEHOLDER	⇨⇨⇩⇩⇨ SLASH + THRUST
KATANA JACKPOT	⇨⇩⇧⇨⇨ SLASH + THRUST
WHISPER EUREKA	SLASH SLASH SLASH (MASH)

I'm sure you're all familiar with April Fool's Day, a.k.a. "All Fools' Day." Forget the person who came up with it. Whoever popularized this "lying free-for-all" accomplished quite the feat. What could be more brutal than a "lying free-for-all"? It's hard to wrap your head around how you could make that part of normal life. From the little I've read about it, the day's origins are shrouded in obscurity, but it makes you wonder. If someone tells you "it's okay to lie," you somehow start to tell the truth. Not so different how you can be incredibly excited to do something, only for somebody to say "Do it" and make you lose your steam. Turning things around, by designating April Fool's Day as a "lying free-for-all," you wind up saying, by extension, or in a roundabout sort of way, that lying on all other days is not okay. But this is where the slippery nature of lying factors in. If you don't normally tell lies (meaning you're not used to telling them), it's easy to tell. Lying on just one day a year is harder than it sounds—not to sound ludicrous and claim that it demands a kind of discipline, but conceptually speaking, that's not far off. If someone is constantly lying, the lies stop standing out, but the problem here is when somebody lies without realizing. Lies may stem from misunderstandings or mistakes, but sometimes the person saying them starts taking them for granted. In light of all that, there is not a soul on earth who doesn't lie. Everybody tells at least one lie per day, but frankly, most of us tell more: so regularly and constantly that it would be fairer to count them by the minute. Who could see through all these lies? It would not only be unreasonable: but physically impossible. Which is why believing other people is, perhaps, essentially a kind of giving up. And that

makes April Fool's Day not a "lying free-for-all," so much as a "lying free fall." Although I have to say, the person who translated it into Japanese¹⁸ is even more incredible than the person who popularized it.

This concludes Book Four of *Sword Tale*. In no time flat, Shichika Yasuri and Togame the Schemer have made it through four months on the road. So much has happened along the way. As the plan is for a twelve-book series, we are now one third of the way along, or two thirds from the end. You can say the tale has only just begun, but it also feels like eight more books is not enough, as if the end is not so far away. I can't get enough of *take's* illustrations, so I almost want to make the series twenty-four books instead, but then we would run out of swords. I see publishing any book as a kind of miracle, and for the miracle to have occurred four times over is something that I shouldn't take for granted.

Here's hoping for eight more miracles.

NISIOISIN

¹⁸ 万愚節 BANGUSETSU a very native-sounding rendition, of "All Fools' Day" 万 MAN/BAN ten thousand; all 愚 GU folly 節 SETSU occasion, time



BOOK FIVE



ZOKUTO
THE ARMOR

刀鎧

第五話

賊刀・鎧

序章

一章——鎧海賊団

二章——校倉必

三章——真庭鳳凰

四章——柳緑花紅

終章

作画

平竹

原案

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構成

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PROLOGUE



In a corner of the town built up around¹ Owari Castle, and cloistered in a copse of trees, we find a residence fit² for a samurai—and within one of its grand rooms, a woman, posture rigid, paused in thought. Though the hour was late, no lamps were lit, and the bedclothes had not been turned down. She stood stiffly in the middle of the room—as if waiting for something.

Because she was waiting for something.

And in short time, she heard it coming from the ceiling.

“Your Highness—”

A disembodied voice.

Though hearing it directly overhead, the woman barely moved her eyebrows, losing none of the stiffness of her posture—not looking up. Her gaze seemed fixed beyond the closed-off paper doors—and it was vacant.

Or perhaps fixated on the inner world.

A gaze starved of humanity.³

“You’re late.”

These were her first words.

“You fool—I suppose you think it’s fine to keep me waiting.”

“My apologies. It takes time to get around the guards—”

“I’m not interested in your excuses. They will do nothing to quell my anger. I want results. Do yourself a favor and stick to the intelligence. The latest—on that nasty⁴ woman.”

Nasty woman.

She made the words sound bilious,⁵ and nearly spat them out—each foaming with gratuitous emotion. But the bile was solely in her tone. No change to her face, her gaze, her bearing.

“Mmh,” the voice hummed from the ceiling. “The Schemer is in Kyushu, bound for Satsuma—dare I say she may be there by now.”

“Satsuma. Which means—she must be eyeing Zokuto the Armor.⁶ Hmm, she seems to be getting ahead of herself.”

“Not without reason—already, she has managed to obtain four of the Twelve Possessed, those masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki not even the Old Shogun could make his own.”

Zetto the Leveler.

Zanto the Razor.

Sento the Legion.

Hakuto the Whisper.

The Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki—

“Indeed, vanquishing Hakuhei Sabi, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, and capturing the Whisper must have earned them abundant experience points.⁷ It appears they had been planning an appearance at Owari Castle after capturing the Legion, but following their unexpected duel with Hakuhei Sabi, they shifted

course to Satsuma.”

“Hakuhei Sabi.”

Finally—the woman smiled.

Or at least, her expression resembled a smile.

“Absurd to get carried away by such a victory, when he was the Strongest Swordsman in Japan *only because I couched him so*—but from the likes of her, I should expect as much.”

“My liege,” said the voice in the ceiling. “This is more than just an inconvenience. The Schemer is one thing, but that swordsman traveling with her—”

“The Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu?” the woman asked, scanning her memory. “Some call him...the Swordless Swordsman.”

“His name is Shichika Yasuri, and he is quite the warrior. He may be lacking in combat experience, having spent the better part of his life on a deserted island—”

“You’ve briefed me on that before, I get the gist—but how did things turn out? You saw him fighting Sabi *with your own eyes*. What was the fight like?”

“It was vicious. Hakuhei Sabi had the upper hand from start to finish—just hammering away at Shichika Yasuri. The Kyotoryu took advantage of an opening—without which, it would be fair to say he never could have won.”

“I should say not. I chose Hakuhei Sabi, imperfect as he is—to be the Strongest in Japan.”

“Yes, my liege,” the voice said from the ceiling, “but after facing off against him, Shichika Yasuri came away entirely unscathed.”

“ ...”

“And not just against Sabi. Since departing on the Sword Hunt, Shichika Yasuri has not been hit by an enemy attack. Not once.”

“Not even a scratch?”

“Not even a scratch,” the voice affirmed her prickled curiosity. “The iainuki of Ginkaku Uneri and the Sentoryu of Meisei Tsuruga both failed to wound him. The Kyotoryu has trained himself to behave like a sword, but what makes his school so powerful is not its offense, but its defense. And in the long term, defense clearly matters far more on the battlefield.”

“Exactly what that woman’s Sword Hunt needs,” she said, making her scorn apparent. “After being double-crossed twice over, by the Maniwa Ninja Clan and Hakuhei Sabi, she draws a fine lot? Some twisted fortune favors⁸ her—which makes it even more exciting to see what happens.”

“Huh?”

“Can’t you see—the next one of the Twelve Possessed her little team hopes to pilfer is Zokuto the Armor, more barrier than sword, the last word in defense.⁹ Not even after issuing his Pirate Ban was the Old Shogun able to obtain it; in terms of defense, it merits the highest certification. Defense versus defense—interesting to see what comes of that.”

“Sounds—like fun.”

The woman was surprised.

But then she laughed—like she was having fun.

“Yes—promises to be a great show. But if that woman lays her hands on a fifth sword, I may need to show up myself. To clarify who’s in charge.”

“Shall I...”

“Actually, let’s hold off. I’ll move when I’m ready. For now, just keep an eye on her. Let her get carried away.¹⁰ We won’t switch to an active role until she has her eighth, or even her ninth sword. She can take her Sword Hunt up and down Japan, but at some point, she will come back to Owari. Which is why I’m working—in the opposite direction.”

“But in the meantime, they could be killed in action somewhere on the Sword Hunt...”

“Fine by me. To be honest, the fact that she has managed to collect four swords—exceeds my expectations. Look how rapidly she took out Hakuhei Sabi, proving herself able to outstrip my predictions. It won’t be hard for her to keep things going, and I would prefer not to do anything too conspicuous.”

“Of course not... Best to leave the high-profile work to them.”

“But we must not be optimistic.¹¹ Just as you say, we cannot be too certain of her capturing a fifth sword in Zokuto the Armor, let alone making it to eight. The Schemer is a gambler. She either wins big or loses everything—but success is not out of the question. Not when she views the Twelve Possessed of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki as nothing more than swords, or instruments for advancing her career—though if I were her, I’d be a bit more careful. Have you any other news?”

“Still no read on the movement of the Maniwa. As previously reported, three ninjas, Komori Maniwa, Shirasagi Maniwa, and Kuizame Maniwa, have shown up on the Schemer’s Sword Hunt, only to perish. The whereabouts of the other nine are unknown.”

“Ah... What is it with these ninjas—oh, my apologies. I forgot you were a ninja

too. Anyway, forget it. And you may go now. Well done.”

“As you command,” the voice assented, but there was no sound after that, not even a scurry behind the ceiling—as if no one had been there, as if it had been a voice and nothing more. Mysterious.

“I wonder what will come of this.”

The woman—still kept a rigid stance and made no sign of moving. Standing alone, in the middle of the room—she appeared to be waiting for something.

What she was waiting for, however, was unclear.



Togame the Schemer, the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

And what about this third contender?

Something is rotten¹² in Owari, but now it's off to Kyushu!

To fight the pirates!

What kind of sword is Zokuto the Armor?!

Let's find out! Unroll this scroll of swords!

The tragedy, the comedy, the tragicomedy!

Tale of the Sword: Book Five ♪

¹ 城下町 JŌKA MACHI “town at the base of a castle”

² 武家屋敷 BUKE YASHIKI housing near a castle, bestowed upon a vassal by his lord

³ 人間性 NINGENSEI “humanness”

⁴ 不愉快 FUYUKAI disagreeable

⁵ 乱雑 RANZATSU hot mess

⁶ 賊刀 鎧 ZOKUTŌ YOROI “The Pirate Sword: Armor”

⁷ 経験値稼ぎ KEIKENCHI KASEGI “gaining XP” as in gaming (deliberate anachronism)

⁸ 悪運の強い AKU’UN NO TSUYOI “have the devil’s luck”

⁹ 絶大の防御力を誇る ZETSUDAI NO BŌGYORYOKU WO HOKORU boast immense defensive power

¹⁰ 泳がして OYOGASHITE “leave [her] swimming” monitor while allowing for a semblance of freedom

¹¹ 楽観は禁物 RAKKAN WA KINMOTSU an easy outlook is prohibited

¹² 不穩 FUON unsettled



CHAPTER
ONE

THE ARMORED
PIRATES



Located in the center of town, the building was known as the Basket¹—although the structure was so rudimentary it may be going too far to call it a building. More like a tall fence of wooden lattice, built into a circle—with generous eyes,² so that the interior was plainly visible. The ring had a diameter of about two hundred feet, and the floor was packed sand, probably hauled here from the nearby shore.

Rudimentary.

No more than a fence built in a clearing.

Nevertheless—a crowd had gathered around the space. Mobs outside the lattice—and two warriors within.

The Basket.

You guessed it—an arena.

Built rudimentarily—so that any damage could be easily repaired.

“Play fair. Ready, go!” the voice of the referee cried from beyond the lattice.

Not even the referee entered the ring—for the warriors, the interior of the Basket was sacred ground.

Sacred ground, belonging to them both.

A swordsman in a pale kimono.

Bearing in both hands a katana far too big for him—a gigantic sword, aimed at his foe. His face and eyes were virile,³ and his features wild⁴ in a way suggesting he was still in training—but even if he was a novice, his menace was inescapable.

His opponent stood across the ring.

At first glance, this did not seem to be a swordsman—no sign of a sword, nor blade, nor any kind of weapon.

No weapon.

None—but fully jacketed.

In armor.

And not the sort of armor⁵ donned for ages by the samurai; far closer to the variety worn by knights of old in Europe, no section of the body⁶ was left exposed. As goes without saying, the places where the joints articulated, and where the plates of metal met, were adequately covered by more metal. Gleaming a polished silver in the sunlight, it seemed a perfect monument to dignity.

This was a giant.

The gigantic sword his foe pointed at him looked no bigger than a normal sword, so giant was the warrior clad in armor—even without its threatening demeanor, face to face, its sheer size was enough to overwhelm, easily over seven feet tall.

They were facing off in an arena, and the swordsman cowered not at this disturbing figure—but clearly, also hesitated to step in closer.

“What’s wrong?” spoke the Armored Warrior, as if to poke fun at the swordsman.

His voice booming.

“Weren’t you going to slice my armor down the middle with your precious sword? Or does the sight of it make you want to run?”

“...nkk.”

The swordsman clenched his teeth.

Which only made the Armored Warrior poke him harder.

“What a disappointment. You call yourself the finest swordsman⁷ in the land, but you can’t even make the first move against an unarmed⁸ man—is this some kind of a joke? That unprecedented winning streak of yours, over five matches, must have been a fluke.”

“—Rahhhhhhhh!”

Rage overmastering his efforts to be patient, the swordsman lifted his gigantic sword and charged at his opponent—with abandon.⁹

His style of swordplay relied more on mass than moves—and on the strength needed to swing that mass through an opponent. It stands to reason that a massive sword is slow, but this swordsman could convert mass into momentum!

Yet—

“...Unbreakable.”¹⁰

The Armored Warrior countered in a not entirely unexpected manner—but not without an element of surprise. Faced with the charging swordsman, he charged too, the move that he so grandly called “Unbreakable” being no more than a body slam.

Right shoulder forward, leaning forward—charge.

And boy—was that charge fast.

It worked the same as the gigantic sword. Like all armor, it was a burden—but making matters worse, this suit of armor was intended for a seven-foot-tall giant. It should have been a pain to move, or even cart around in pieces. But once you got it going, the momentum was unstoppable.

Mere metal.

Sheer¹¹ metal—heading for its target.

The hotshot swordsman, charging at him, had no time to escape—perhaps by then he realized that the Armored Warrior’s jabs had been calculated,¹² but that ship had sailed.

The swords clashed.

Different heights.

And, notably, at different speeds.

As a simple matter of arithmetic,¹³ the swordsman was the one sent flying—his body savaged,¹⁴ muscles slashed through his kimono. After soaring through the air, he slammed down helplessly into the ground, the fact the ring was packed with sand no blessing.

The swordsman did not rise.

Perhaps—he would never rise again.

It did not appear that he was dead, but there was no need to confirm if he was conscious. It had only been a simple tackle, but his entire body glowed with blood. What could possibly have happened in the moment they were tangled?

What happened to the massive sword?

That attack intent on slicing through that suit of armor.

Some moments later, scraps of the weapon—rained from the sky. The massive sword had shattered and scattered to the winds.¹⁵ The striking blade, meant to crack that armor open, was instead, or maybe not even in stead,¹⁶ what cracked from the impact—and literally vanished.

“Match!” yelled the referee—as the crowds watching outside the lattice cheered. It appeared that people gambled on the fights held in the Basket; almost everyone was crying out and waving wooden tags. From the number of smiling faces, the odds must have been in favor of the Armored Warrior, although his unanimous support would make the payout miniscule.

Victory aside, the Armored Warrior was the favorite—the Star of the Basket.

Of course he was.

He was the captain of a band of pirates that ran this harbor town.

As a matter of fact—the band of pirates also ran the Basket.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Nearly all the spectators were cheering for the victor and waving their hands to make him look their way—except for a duo, whose arms had been crossed since the fight began, and whose eyes were fixed on the interior of the lattice.

A whitehaired woman dressed in a brash kimono—and behind her, as if to keep her safe, a tall man, stripped to the waist, with tousled hair.

“Hey, Togame.” Despite the din of the applause, the man addressed the woman in a low voice, speaking carefully. “He snapped the sword. What’re we gonna do?”

“I can see that, Shichika,” the woman called Togame answered the man, without turning. “It seems like you weren’t listening, yet again... That sword was nothing special. He blabbed on about how legendary it was, and it was fine, for a regular sword, but it is none of our concern. That guy played a supporting role. His job is over. Say goodbye. Our concern here—is the Armored Warrior.”

“Armored Warrior.”

“Right. His name is Kanara Azekura.¹⁷ Captain of the Armored Pirates—and your next opponent.”

“Hmm—”

Hearing this, Shichika took a closer look at the Armored Warrior in the ring.

And just then, the warrior looked his way; to Shichika, it felt like their eyes had met.

But this, of course, was an illusion.

He was too far away, and the warrior was only posing for the crowd—besides, the helm had no apparent slit for seeing—could this guy even see out of the armor?

“So I guess this guy...Kanara Azekura? Did he leave the Mutant Blade at home? Like, was this other guy so weak he didn’t need it? He didn’t look so weak to me.”

“Wrong,” Togame said. “*The armor is the katana.*”

“...The armor?”

“Didn’t you feel the lifeforce¹⁸ or whatever? Maybe we’re too far away. Zokuto the Armor, one of the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks among the thousand forged by Kiki Shikizaki. *A katana built for defense, and patterned*

after western plate mail—it seems to have fallen into dangerous hands.”

Togame was disconsolate, but her smile showed that she would not be beaten.

“Lucky for us to see Kanara Azekura show off the Armor so soon after we landed in the harbor—Shichika. Let’s find a place to stay. I’ll explain the rest once we unpack. From there I’ll spin my scheme.”



Thus we arrive in Book Five of the Sword Tale.

This one has some significant developments towards the end, so I’d like to get the summary of what has happened “Thus Far” out of the way, as simply as I can.

...

...

Somewhere long ago, there lived a swordsmith who had magic powers. His name was Kiki Shikizaki. A lone wolf, attached to no tradition—“lone wolf” may be a bit too flattering, since in fact he was a heretic, rejected from his field.

But the swords he made were top notch.

They earned themselves the title Mutant Blades, and reigned universally over the Age of Warring States—causing warriors of the era to vie for their

possession. Numbering one thousand in total, the Mutant Blades became synonymous with power and were hoarded by the daimyos as signs of status.

Eventually, the merry¹⁹ Age of Warring States drew to a close. The nation was united by the sword²⁰—with the emergence of a single man who ruled over the land.





A warrior known today as the Old Shogun.

Yet even after he emerged as ruler from the Age of Warring States, he was unable to let go of his attachment to the Shikizaki blades, because of their venom. War was over; there was no reason to seek them out—but the end and the means had been reversed. The Old Shogun no longer sought the blades in order to win battles, but fought battles because he craved more blades.

The premier example of which was the Great Sword Hunt.

This legislation sought to collect every single sword in the entirety of Japan, ostensibly to build a giant buddha—all told, the Old Shogun amassed over one hundred thousand swords, and melted them to slag for the Katana Buddha—erected at Seiryoin Gokenji Temple, on Mt. Sayabashiri in Tosa. In the process, he effaced the regional dominion of the daimyos, before they ever had the chance to scrap their acquiescence for antagonism.

And yet—he failed to capture all the swords.

By then, twelve of the thousand Mutant Blades of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki were already well known for being masterpieces—and try as the Old Shogun may, he could not hunt down the Twelve Possessed.

Zetto the Leveler.

Zanto the Razor.

Sento the Legion.

Hakuto the Whisper.

Zokuto the Armor.

Soto the Twin.

Akuto the Eel.

Bito the Sundial.

Oto the Cured.

Seito the Garland.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Ento the Bead.

He knew who owned them, and their whereabouts—but he was unable to wrest them from their owners.

Fighting and failing—twelve times over.

Because he launched multiple attempts per sword, and failed every single time, his actual record²¹ had to be far worse than 0 for 12. Even the Old Shogun, the ruler of the nation, was exhausted by these chronic failures—and when he died, his fiefdom was worth little over 50,000 koku.

Time went on.

Since the Old Shogun lacked a successor, the Yanari, known for their political dexterity,²² stepped in to govern—beginning the Owari Bakufu, in which the Yanari Shogunate controlled all of Japan.

Peace and Order.

These words were the Yanari trademark.

Inevitably, the swords of Kiki Shikizaki became less and less of a necessity—this should have been the case in the time of the Old Shogun, making it an obvious eventuality.

Swords.

Swordsmen.

Even warriors—were no longer a necessity.

They had been forgotten.

Wiped from the public consciousness.

This was a new world, built on peace and order.

And under the Owari Bakufu—it lasted well over a hundred years. But at a point when almost no one living had experienced a war, an incident occurred.

Or perhaps “occurred” is the wrong word.

Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu and a trusted ally of the Owari Bakufu, incited the first nationwide conflict in more than a century—sending tremors through the government.

The power of the bakufu had been macerated²³ after decades in the lukewarm spring of peace, allowing for the uprising to plow straight through the bakufu, until it was only a step away from being overturned. In the final estimate, it would be wrong to say the bakufu was victorious, since their victory brought on a legacy of trouble.²⁴ Perhaps the Yanaris should not have touted “Peace and Order” and rather built their realm around the words “Trust No One.”²⁵

Twenty years later.

Or after twenty precarious²⁶ years with no clear strategy.

A certain Whitehaired Schemer made a proposal.

To hunt the last swords down.

The swords that even the Old Shogun failed to capture.

Those masterworks, the Twelve Possessed.

And make the nation face afresh the power of the bakufu—

Though suffering vicissitudes,²⁷ the Whitehaired Schemer was doing precisely what she boasted she would do. From among the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, she had captured Zetto the Leveler, Zanto the Razor, Sento the Legion, and Hakuto the Whisper.

From Komori Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan, she had seized a katana so sturdy it could never bend or break—Zetto the Leveler.

From Ginkaku Uneri, the Lord of Gekoku Castle, she seized a katana with an edge so sharp it could cut anything in two—Zanto the Razor.

From Meisai Tsuruga, the Mistress of Triad Shrine, a katana that was impossibly a thousand swords in one—Sento the Legion.

And from Hakuhei Sabi, the Sword Saint, of late the Strongest in Japan, a katana so thin you had to squint to see it—Hakuto the Whisper.

Hunted each one down.

To do so, she had used a sword they call the Kyotoryu—a swordsman whose teaching forbade him the use of any kind of weapon.

The Seventh Master—Shichika Yasuri.

...

...

Which takes us to the present moment.

It remains to be seen whether or not this Sword Tale will end “Happily Ever After.”²⁸ For the time being, the Whitehaired Schemer and the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu continue their journey—



Kyushu²⁹ is, has been, and always will be celebrated for its hot springs. Thanks to its famous active volcanoes, the terrain is so rife with thermal pools that you can find one anywhere you stick a shovel, and the island has become a byword for relaxation.³⁰ The town surrounding Dakuon³¹ Harbor was dotted with hot springs, and the inn Togame picked for them had its own.

Right after the match was over at the Basket, they snuck back to the inn and headed straight for the outdoor³² bath. They had traveled quite a distance—not like anybody was complaining, but in less than five months, they’d journeyed from the Capital all the way down to Satsuma in Kyushu, almost entirely on foot, and the unforgiving trek was catching up with both of them. Which made sense for Togame, waifish as she was; meanwhile, so big and muscular he was something of a monster, Shichika, too, having fought for five months straight, counting his time spent training in the dojos, could use a break. Especially ever since they arrived in Kyushu—somehow word had gotten out that he’d bested Hakuhei Sabi, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, in a stopover at Ganryu Island on the trip over from Honshu.³³ Lousy ronin were constantly challenging Shichika to duels, since he was newly minted as the Strongest, and to make it to their destination, Satsuma, he had dealt with one sorry challenger after another. Of course he was worn out, the exhaustion as much physical as mental.

A hot spring was exactly what the doctor ordered.

When Togame asked him to take a dip, he was all for it, though unsure what it would entail.

Bathing under the stars.

Girls and boys together.³⁴

Nothing unusual for the time—in fact, back then, it was the norm. Sure, they could have taken turns, but Togame was not the type to care about that sort of thing, and Shichika had not been taught to care. Plus, he needed to protect Togame. He was happy with whatever kept him by her side.

This was the sort of inn that existed because of its hot spring. The bath outside was the size of a pool. Though not so deep, Togame was so small (and even smaller once she doffed all of her kimonos, layer after layer, in order to bathe) the steaming water reached her shoulders when she sat. She tied her long white hair back with a tenugui,³⁵ and from the tray floating before her, which she had ordered as room service, she poured herself another cup of sake, a little tipsy.

Because Shichika was enormous beside Togame, most of his upper body stuck out of the water when he sat, but since the spring was on the hotter side, it suited him fine, judging from the look of pleasure on his face. Baring every inch of his ripped torso, he gazed up at the starry sky.

“Great spot, huh?” began Togame, gesturing with her little cup.³⁶ Her cheeks were getting rosy. It had seemed that there were other guests, but at this hour, the two had the entire hot spring to themselves. “They said the water’s good for sprains and bruises—is it working?”

“Not sure,” replied Shichika. “I don’t have any injuries for it to work on.”

“Hmm. True.”

“But it feels great just to stretch my legs out in an enormous tub like this.”

Togame smiled like she thought something was funny.

“Shichika. Remember what I told you? When we were leaving Kyoto. *Protect the swords. Protect me. And protect yourself*—just as I cannot have you nicking up the swords that we’re collecting, just as you must not allow me, your employer, to come to harm, I cannot have you suffering a mortal blow in battle, as we would have to call the Sword Hunt off. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“At first, I thought the last part would be hardest—with Ginkaku Uneri, and Meisai Tsuruga, and Hakuhei Sabi...and the Maniwacs. These were fierce opponents, but you came away without a scratch. I know that it hasn’t been easy, but you’ve protected yourself marvelously. To be honest, I am seriously impressed.”

“What the hell?”

Complimented out of nowhere, Shichika was bashful. Twenty years growing up on that desert island—and five months out in the world.³⁷ His worldview had matured enough for him to be embarrassed when Togame gave him compliments.

“You make it sound like it’s behind us,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Togame, don’t tell me you think capturing four swords means we’ve accomplished something—we still have a long, long way to go.”

“I understand that, thank you very much. Except...”

She poked the tray floating before her—

Sending the carafe³⁸ and cup over to Shichika.

“Drink.”

“...No, I’m good on alcohol.”

“A little bit will do you good. Or is my sake not good enough for you?”

“...”

“DRINK IT.”

Tipsy? She was toasted.

She swatted at the water like a little kid.

At a loss, Shichika poured himself some sake and took a very tiny sip (or pretended to).

“Well?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Except—what?”

“Oh... I just mean, so like, you know how we just took Hakuto the Whisper back from Hakuhei Sabi? I was gonna say, that gives our schedule, on the Sword Hunt, some flexibility.”

“Flexibility? I don’t understand...” Shichika sent the tray back toward Togame, signaling his inability to keep up with her. “What do you mean?”

“Before I hired you to join me on this Sword Hunt, I made a couple of blunders³⁹... I’ve been desperate to make up for those losses. I’ve been so tense. But as of last month, when you took down Hakuhei Sabi, my losses have been redeemed⁴⁰ for the most part.”

“Ahh...”

Togame the Schemer had been double-crossed twice over.

Once by the Maniwa Ninja Clan, and again by Hakuhei Sabi.

Her schemes did as much damage when they worked as when they backfired—which is exactly what had happened. At first she called upon the Maniwa, but no sooner did they lay hands on Zetto the Leveler than they betrayed Togame—for the money. Next, she hired Hakuhei Sabi, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—but the venom of the Shikizaki blades consumed him, and the second he held Hakuto the Whisper, he left her employ.

After suffering betrayal two times in a row, Togame was in a hopeless situation, and her last hope⁴¹ had been to hire the Kyotoryu, a school banished to a desert island. At the time, she aimed to pay a visit to one Mutsue Yasuri, renowned Hero of the Rebellion, and the Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu, but sadly the man had given up the ghost.⁴² Instead, the Seventh Master, Shichika Yasuri, partnered with her on the Sword Hunt.

“To start things off, we reclaimed Zetto the Leveler from Komori Maniwa, and on Ganryu Island, we reclaimed Hakuto the Whisper from Hakuhei Sabi. ‘Reclaimed’ being the key word here. These were the swords I lost, which makes it hard to label them as signs of progress, but things are moving forward now, without a doubt. I can finally stop scrambling—and settle into the Sword Hunt, taking my time.”

“Your time.”

“My time, getting down and dirty.”

“...”

Shichika didn’t see why she needed to get that way, but he let it go. Togame

seemed dead serious.

Intrigues⁴³ were her field, not his.

If it meant Togame could rest a little easier, then he was glad. The quest to round up all the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki held no great meaning for him. Forged as they were with emphasis not on the swordsman, but the sword, these katanas (and indeed their venom) did pique his interest—as an exemplar of the Kyotoryu, forsakers of the sword—but that alone was not enough to see beyond the nuisance. While not at all averse to effort, he was by no means a diligent man.

Shichika was fighting for a woman, for Togame—and if she could shed some weight off of her shoulders, he was glad for her.

Aware of this or not...

“To tell you the truth,” Togame said, “at first I doubted whether you could handle it—though maybe ‘doubt’ is a strong word. It’s just that Komori and Sabi made me overcautious. They turned my Sword Hunt upside down. I was afraid the second you laid hands on the Leveler, you would leave my employ, just like the others.”

“That’s crazy. I could never—wait, is that why you’ve been sending the swords back to Owari as soon as we get them?”

“I won’t deny it.”

Togame went on.

“But I’m done being so concerned. This is not the sort of journey you can continue burdened with suspicion... We’ve recovered from the loss of their betrayals. There’s an aspect of your character, as a person, that makes it hard to leave you to your own devices...but for the time being I am satisfied that you

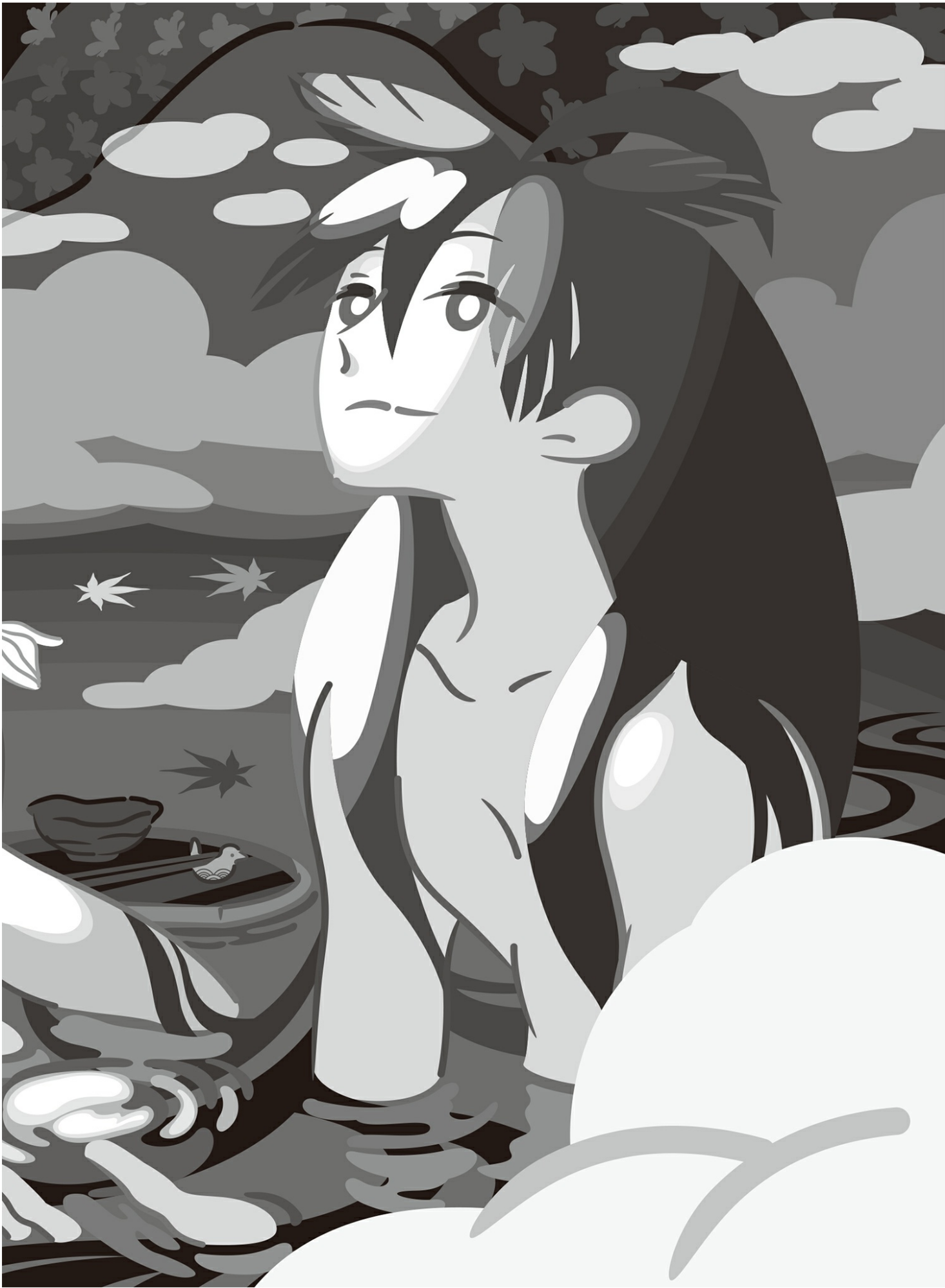
won't stab me in the back, not intentionally. Don't prove me wrong."

"What is this?" Shichika laughed. "All this time, I've felt nothing but loved by you."

"...This ain't that kind of story."

"I thought you hired the Kyotoryu, to be your sword, because I wouldn't stab you in the back, like the Maniwacs or Sabi. Because the Swordless Swordsman—doesn't work for money or for swords."





“You’re right about that.”

He was a sword.

And a sword could not betray her.

“The best reason to fight—”

“Is love?”

“Exactly. A man who fights for love.”

Here Shichika spoke without the least embarrassment, his capacity for emotion being elementary at best.

“Because I fell for you, Togame—I could never betray you. Over these five months traveling together, it’s like I’ve loved you more each day.”

“And yet we can sit together in the hot spring, and you don’t even do anything.”

“Huh? What do you mean? Wasn’t this your idea?”

“So what?”

Hiding her embarrassment on her end, Togame took a big swig of sake straight from the carafe. It seemed like they were out. She placed the empty container on the tray, and sent it floating.

“Alright—time to talk business. I had planned to do so once we were done bathing, but this feels too good to stop. Seems like no one else is coming, so we may as well talk here.”

“Okay. I can’t imagine anyone is eavesdropping... Been a while since we’ve seen a Maniwac.”

“Those guys weren’t exactly chasing us—besides, the less we run into them the

better. It's hard to imagine more annoying enemies."

"Feels like we've fought more than enough of them already... So, tell me more about the next sword that we're after, Zokuto the Armor. Were you serious back there? About that warrior being the owner, and the sword being the armor—"

"Dead serious."

"Is that it, though? Seems too simple," Shichika voiced his concern. "Armored Pirates, they say...and that's what we get? No games...or, like, forthcoming. But something's fishy⁴⁴ about this. That Armored Warrior..."

"Kanara Azekura."

"Yeah, Azekura. That guy seems like...he's really popular."

As he spoke, Shichika recalled the battle at the Basket.

"Not just Azekura though... From what I hear around town, the pirates have a real good reputation. Makes it awkward to announce we came to take him down."

"Better not, if you want to save your skin. The village has a mayor and all, but in essence, the pirates are the ones who run this harbor."

"Still, it doesn't feel like they took over... I don't understand why they're so popular. What'd they do? I guess that, what's her name, Meisai Tsuruga, who I fought at Triad Shrine, she started as a bandit—"

"Pirates and bandits aren't quite the same. I suppose they're all a bunch of rough-and-tumble scoundrels—but the thing is, pirates maraud the sea, not land."

"Huh?"

“Pirates need a place to come home to. Which means they never do harm to their base harbor. On the contrary, they work hard on its behalf—for the Armored Pirates, Dakuon Harbor is such a home. They may behave the same as bandits, but if they lose their harbor, they’re finished.”

“Makes sense.”

“Between Kyushu and Shikoku, there are loads of pirates, but they’re all the same. In the time of the Old Shogun, the Armored Pirates operated in the Inland Sea—but after he lost power, for some reason they decided to relocate to Satsuma.”

“Wow. They’ve had the Armor for a long time, then. Their naming isn’t just lazy, because the armor plays a big role in their history.⁴⁵ Right, you taught me this—the Old Shogun issued the Pirate Ban so he could get the Armor, didn’t he.”

“Good memory—but the Pirate Ban failed to get the job done. The pirates must not be underestimated. As long as they’re at sea, nothing can stop them.”

“Guess we’ll have to fight them on land. But Togame, not to split hairs, but didn’t we just see him fighting on land? That’s what the warrior was doing, with the Armor.”

“A kind of public service.⁴⁶ A way of drawing people to the hot springs. Let’s call it what it is—illegal gambling...but no one seems to mind. Even the bakufu turns a blind eye.⁴⁷ Besides, even if you start cracking down on that sort of thing, you never see the end of it... The Basket holds these games once every two weeks. The fighters receive a ranking, and that determines the level of their odds. But far and away, the favorite is Kanara Azekura.”

“Sounds like you were hard at work.”

“Don’t be fresh. I repeat, it was pure luck that we got to see Azekura in action. We must have been rewarded for our everyday behavior.”

“I don’t know about that...” Shichika laughed. He had a lot on his mind. “So, what happens next? I’m not sure what sort of diplomacy you have planned, but should I, as the sword, bank on fighting Azekura in the Basket?”

“No, I don’t think you can cut into their schedule like that...and even if you could, it would take us extra work. Not to learn a lesson from our visit to the Triad Shrine, but why go out of our way to fight on enemy territory? The Armor is enough trouble as it is.”

“What kind of trouble?” asked Shichika. “I thought it was just a suit of armor. Togame, this might sound stupid...but what makes that thing a katana? I know Kiki Shikizaki was a kook,⁴⁸ but calling armor a katana is absurd.”

“I’m afraid it’s a katana all the same. It may have been hard to see from a distance, but the metal plates are sharpened to an edge. Why do you think that swordsman with the gigantic sword was shredded to a pulp by a mere tackle? Those weren’t abrasions. They were lacerations.”

“He sure was bloody in the end...hmm. *A tackle that chops your enemy into bits.* But in that case—”

“I know what you’re going to say. This is no normal sword—more armor than anything else. It might be *armor made from the same steel*⁴⁹ *used to forge katanas*, but it’s obviously more fit for defense than for attack.

“At the risk of repeating myself,” Togame continued, “so far on the Sword Hunt, you have gotten by without a scratch... Even when Komori Maniwa attacked you with his Star Cannon, back on the island, in the first real battle of your life, you blocked him like an iron wall—but Azekura too, ensconced in

Zokuto the Armor, is a wall of iron. What you need to remember from the Basket is not how the swordsman was all but blown apart, but his massive sword turning to powder. It would take no small amount of force to scratch the Armor.”

“That kind of hardness reminds me of the Leveler.”

“Yes. When Kiki Shikizaki made the Armor, I dare say he had the same idea. But built the way it is, the Armor could not possibly be as hard as the Leveler—”

Zetto the Leveler—uncanny hardness.

Zanto the Razor—uncanny sharpness.

Sento the Legion—uncanny numbers.

Hakuto the Whisper—uncanny fragility.

“Zokuto the Armor—was forged to have uncanny armor class. Not merely hard, but hard to beat.⁵⁰ That iron wall cannot be broken, at least not in the confines of the Basket.”

“If the pirates are unstoppable at sea, and the Armor can’t be beaten in the Basket, seems like we’re out of options. What’s left, fighting him in the sky? To begin with,” said Shichika, “you told me the Armor is unbreakable, but I’m not supposed to damage any of the swords, so I wouldn’t want to break it anyway.”

“Quit your gloating.⁵¹ Who do you think I am? I don’t need you to remind me. There’s no chink in the Armor. It covers his entire body...”

“If we still had Zanto the Razor, I bet we could break his defense. Of course, that would mean scratching up the Armor.”

“True, but we are not without our options. Your Fatal Orchid—sorry, the number has slipped my mind, but the armor-piercing⁵² one...”

“Oh, right.”

Togame forgetting the form’s numeration was one thing. Shichika replying with those words, “Oh, right,” seemed far more problematic—but anyway, armor-piercing.

This move resembled kenpo more than anything else. A thrusting strike that worked through even shields and armor, *scrambling the insides without scrambling the shell*—with adequate practice, it could even be applied “long distance”⁵³ or with “instantaneity.”⁵⁴ A quintessential move for the swordless Kyotoryu, but traditional forms of swordplay relied on similar tricks to pull off the acrobatic feat⁵⁵ of cutting not the thing before you, but whatever was behind it.

“Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako,”⁵⁶ said Shichika. “The Fatal Orchid based on Form Four, the Asagao.”⁵⁷ Among the Seven Forms of the Kyotoryu, it’s *the only time I make a fist*... Yeah, I could take down Azekura, without harming the Armor that surrounds him.”

That way he could uphold Rule One, about not harming the swords, and still face off against the Armor—Shichika nodded comprehendingly.

Togame saw this and said, “Look, even if you don’t use a move like that, what makes Azekura, and the Armor, different from your previous fights is that there are plenty of ways to beat them. The armor may be like an iron wall, but I’m sure that if we put our heads together, we can think of a few ways to take down the pirate captain.”

“Okay. Such as?”

“Shoving him into the sea,” Togame proposed without batting an eye. “The Armor may be flawless, but Azekura is a human being, and needs to breathe.

There's no way the Armor is airtight—it has to have a small gap somewhere. If we sink him, the Armor will start filling up with water, and he'll suffocate and drown. The Armor is probably heavy enough that once it fills with water, he has no chance of staying afloat. And if we put a fat chain or something around his ankles, we can crank him out of the water once he drowns, and then wipe off the Armor so it doesn't rust."

"Wow...you sure have some devilish ideas..."

Shichika was not taking the bait.

Although he sat in steaming water, he felt a shiver down his spine.

Togame, unfazed, shared another idea.

"How about we fry him? Fry or freeze, either would do, but frying him would definitely be easier. We light him up,⁵⁸ but not so hot it damages the Armor—after all, metal conducts heat so well. The Armor will turn into an oven, Azekura will fry to death inside."

"..."

"Huh? What'd I say? Shichika, why are you making that face?"

"No, it's just..."

Togame tilted her neck in surprise at Shichika, who somehow had taken this long to recoil from her dark side. Wasn't he happy to see Togame in her element again, behaving like the strategist⁵⁹ she was after reclaiming both the Leveler and the Whisper?

"I mean, you're definitely right about the Armor, awesome as it is, not changing the fact that Azekura is human. There's gotta be a way—my own armor-piercing move also skips the armor, and hits whoever is inside it. If you're

okay with fighting dirty, we could always catch him with the Armor off.”

“That’s not dirty. It’s par for the course. But it’s also out of the question. This man—Kanara Azekura, Captain of the Armored Pirates, never removes the Armor before mortal eyes.”

“Oh... Sort of like how Ginkaku Uneri, back at Gekoku Castle, never set foot outside of his little room.”

Ginkaku Uneri’s Danger Zone.

An iron wall if there ever was one.

“From what I hear,” reported Togame, “not even his fellow Armored Pirates have seen him in the flesh, or even seen his face. In that sense, he is shrouded in mystery. No one knows about his life before joining the pirates.”

“Suppose when you’re a pirate, you don’t want people remembering your face anyway. The Armor is definitely cooler. Makes a statement.”

“It reminds me of how Ginkaku Uneri always kept Zanto the Razor at his side—I wouldn’t be surprised if he wears it all the time, not only to protect himself, but to protect the sword. That much, he would anticipate and guard against—hmph.”

There was something gravid about Togame’s remark. While Shichika noticed, he decided it was not worth pursuing, and let it go.

“Alright,” he said, to keep things moving. “But isn’t it possible he has moves for fighting water and fire?”

“Of course. The ideas that I just gave you were simplified, to make sure you understood. We can’t just shove him into the sea. He’s far too big and heavy. And we can’t heat him up, if he’s inside the Basket—see what I mean? Our actual

strategy will necessarily be far more complicated, far more intricate⁶⁰—but Shichika. We have a more immediate concern.”

“What’s that?”

“Azekura’s popularity,” Togame said with a sardonic smile. “Make no mistake—when I call him popular, I am not calling him a perfect person. Bandits and pirates are all a bunch of good-for-nothing scoundrels—they only give back to this harbor town for their own benefit.⁶¹ They have plenty of reasons to create a distraction from their plunder and their slaughter on the high seas. The Great Sword Hunt was idiotic legislation, but the Pirate Ban was nothing of the sort—whereby,” Togame paused here for effect. *“I have no qualms about you killing Kanara Azekura—none.”*

“...”

Komori Maniwa. Ginkaku Uneri. Meisai Tsuruga. Hakuhei Sabi.

How exactly did these words resonate for Shichika Yasuri, who had thus far slain every one of his opponents, sparing not a life?

Shichika was not incapable of reining in his swordplay.

Case in point, soon after they crossed over from the mainland, when Togame toured him around the dojos of Kyoto to put his abilities to the test, he had injured not a single one of his opponents, at least not permanently—

Regardless.

When it came to actual battle, he killed with zero hesitation.

That included all his duels since they entered Kyushu.

“On the way here—on the wayside, you accepted several challenges.”

“Huh? Oh. You mean all the guys who asked to fight me, out of the blue,⁶²

after I became the Strongest in Japan. At first I was like what the hell—I guess there's been what, ten guys or something?"

"Thirteen," said Togame. "All of whom you slew."

"Um, so?"

"Well..."

Um, so?

Thirteen men—after slaying thirteen men, all he had to say was "Um, so?" This went beyond his island upbringing. Such was his personality.

Making it hard to leave him to his own devices.

At present, this was not, per se, a problem. Or rather, it was a chronic problem—certainly not one that could be solved immediately.

Not at this juncture.

"What I'm saying is that killing Sabi ushered in a world of hardship. Sabi was not exactly popular, but he was infamously the Strongest in Japan, and that carries a lot of significance and weight... Think for a second, Shichika. We can use one of my strategies, or you can take him down by brute force, but if we kill Azekura—what will happen?"

"We get the Armor."

"THINK!"

Togame palmed hot water in his face.

This finally got him thinking.

"Huh... Oh, you mean because Azekura is so popular, we might wind up with the whole town turning against us?"

“Right. Not just the pirates.”

It had taken Shichika a moment to catch up, but Togame accepted his response.⁶³

“Not as bad as back at Triad Shrine, where the two of us could have wound up fending off a thousand miko—but not far off. This town has hundreds of people, and they’re all relying on the pirates. This is a harbor, but unlucky for us, we’d never be allowed to retreat across the sea. Like it or not, our backs would be against a wall.”

“So I guess we can’t just grab the sword and hightail⁶⁴ it out of here... By the way, how many of these pirates are there anyway?”

“The core comprises about twenty. Nothing you can’t handle.”

“Pretty small band of pirates.”

“They’re mean and lean.⁶⁵ But either way—they’re nothing you can’t handle. I doubt that all the pirates are warriors. Consider this *open season*. But stick to pirates, we don’t want the entire town against us...”

“Last time, it was a formal duel between two swordsmen, so you got the day off,” reminded Shichika. “From your diplomacy.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Warriors and swordsmen may be the focus on the battlefield, but the most important part of battle is not whether you win or lose—winning is of course ideal, but winning on its own is not enough.

What matters in battle is how you prepare—and how you clean up.⁶⁶

Regardless of whether you win or lose, not dealing with the aftermath is unacceptable. Just as the most glorious victory can be more loss than gain if you

leave a mess, the most pitiful defeat can be more gain than loss if you pick up the pieces.

No such thing as an undefeated king who wins every match.

What separates the first-rate from the second-rate is winning as much and losing as little as possible—how you act before the fight, and how you respond to a win, and to a loss. This pattern is not limited to swordplay or the battlefield—just look at Togame the Schemer. She was betrayed twice over, by the Maniwa and by Hakuhei Sabi, but in less than half a year she made up for her loss. Talk about picking up the pieces.

“But in this case—I’m not sure who to engage. Meeting directly with Azekura would be the quickest option, but if we want to catch him unawares,⁶⁷ I could sit down with the puppet⁶⁸ mayor...or perhaps the harbormaster...”

Seeing Togame mutter to herself and drift into her own world, Shichika decided it was time that he stopped listening. They were entering Togame country—whatever she was planning, he was not about to stand in her way.

He had no choice but to rely on her, and let her do her job.

“Togame, want to get out?”

They had been sitting and talking longer than they realized. Any longer in the hot spring, and they might start feeling woozy—not like they were stuck in suits of armor, but it would never do for them to drown or fry themselves.

“Ah, sure. Let’s go, there’s plenty of time to think things through. Now that we’ve recovered the Leveler and the Whisper, no one at the bakufu is breathing down my neck⁶⁹—we can afford to make preparations. Oh, and Shichika. Before we go, stand up.”

“Huh?”

“I said stand up, right where you are.”

Although he was a bit confused, Shichika did what he was told. When he stood, his enormous body made no small wave, and the flecks of water he sent flying almost hit Togame in the face. Unperturbed, she took a long⁷⁰ look at his body gleaming in the starlight. Shichika made no effort to conceal himself and let Togame stare straight at him.

She nodded satisfactorily.

“Seeing all of you, I realize just how big you really are—skinny for your height, and yet in no way feeble. Am I crazy, or have you gotten bigger since we left the island?”

“Yeah? I’m not sure, myself. I haven’t paid attention...but if you say so, maybe I have. Is that okay?”

“It’s fine... Enough. Sorry to have looked you up and down⁷¹ like that. Let’s talk more back at the room.”

“Huh? You mean we’re not done talking?”

“Not yet. We need to discuss the most important thing.”

Togame stood. Like Shichika, she made no effort to hide herself. She rose from the steaming water and headed for the changing area, untying the tenugui holding back her hair.

Shichika followed close behind.

He had made it to the fifth month of the Sword Hunt without suffering a single injury, not even a bruise or sprain—but he still thought that the hot spring was delightful.



We can afford to make preparations.

That was how Togame put it, but things would not proceed exactly as she hoped—if things worked that way, she would never have been forced to set off on this perilous Sword Hunt in the first place. That night, their circumstances, the conditions under which they sought Zokuto the Armor, one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, would transform entirely⁷²—unnoticed by Togame, until just before it happened. She had not been expecting it one bit. Not in the slightest.⁷³

Getting a massage⁷⁴ is, has been, and always will be the perfect complement to a hot bath, but now that Togame and Shichika were being plagued with unsolicited auditions for the role of Strongest Swordsman⁷⁵ from all manner of ruffians and rogues, they could not be so careless as to trust a stranger with their bodies. They were deep behind enemy lines—if they wanted a massage after their bath, they would need to make do with each other.

That being said, Togame was not about to offer Shichika a rubdown for a job well done. The world would end before that ever happened. In this case, “make do with each other” meant that Shichika massaged Togame, on a one-way street. Yet, as you may expect, Togame had her reservations about Shichika running his man hands all over her body. Hence, a contrivance.

Back at the room, lying face down on the futon and dressed in her thin slip, she had Shichika step on her back.

Rubbing her down with his feet.

“...”

“Oh, right there... That feels so good...”

Wearing a look of euphoria, Togame let Shichika sink into her body. There was something inescapably freaky⁷⁶ about a man stripped to the waist walking all over a petite girl in a thin slip—“massage” didn’t seem like the right word here.

Her contrivance was problematic,⁷⁷ much like their manner of ascent up the thousand stairs to Triad Shrine.

You could say that she was digging her own grave.

“It feels good? Me, I’m getting this sense...that weird needs are budding in my heart...”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean? Your feet stopped. Step on me. Harder.”

“Harder? Okay...”

While fearing he would crush Togame if he stepped on her in earnest, he did as he was told, exercising marvelous restraint. A good example of the sort of trouble being too obedient can get you into.

“It might feel good if you, like, stepped a little on my head.”

“I’m not so... Okay, fine.”

Shichika stepped right onto her head, white hair and all. Togame moaned with ecstasy, not sounding like herself at all.

“Yes...”

...Maybe she knew what she was doing, and was a freak after all.

In which case, Shichika didn't stand a chance; sooner or later, he'd be going there.

"What were you saying earlier—about the most important thing?"

"Oh, that...hm. So we seem to have various tactics at our disposal for Zokuto the Armor, starting with Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako...and we have all kinds of stuff to do before you fight this hometown hero pirate captain... Basically, we've talked again and again about filling in all the moats—but not about the crux of the matter, namely Kanara Azekura."

"Oh yeah, I was gonna ask you."

Pirates. A katana fashioned after the armor worn by European knights of old. Flashy details all—but what about the man who owned and wore Zokuto the Armor, the captain of a band of pirates that ran this harbor town, Kanara Azekura? They had failed to consider what kind of a person he might be.

"When I saw him fighting at the Basket, it seemed like all he did was tackle that guy—I heard him say 'Unbreakable' or whatever, so it must have been some kind of move. Trouble is, what works for taking down the Armor won't necessarily work for taking down the man."

"Azekura fights at the Basket at least once every two weeks. With a little digging,⁷⁸ I'll learn everything there is to know—but listen," Togame told Shichika, whose feet were stomping all over her back. "This comes down to something simpler than that. Have you ever fought somebody taller than you?"

"..."

Kanara Azekura.

During his fight at the Basket, Shichika had only seen him from afar, and with barely any frame of reference, so it hadn't left such a strong impression—but in

fact, Armor or no, the pirate captain was absurdly tall.

The man was more than giant.

The Armor was well over seven feet tall—making Azekura, who fit inside of it, over seven feet tall himself.

One or even two heads taller than Shichika Yasuri.

If a guy never took off his armor, and never showed his face, he could easily be a group of people, taking shifts—but in this case, Kanara Azekura was undoubtedly the only man who wore the Armor.

Men that huge—were in short supply.

“Just my dad and sister. They were taller than me, when I was a kid⁷⁹...”

Mutsue Yasuri.

Nanami Yasuri.

The family he had lived with back on Haphazard Island—

“I passed my sister around seven, and my dad in the middle of my teens. Out of all the guys that you’ve arranged for me to fight so far in dojos, and the pesky challengers I’ve had to fend off since we crossed over into Kyushu...no one was bigger than me.”

“Hm. I knew you were inexperienced—but this means that since you grew into your body, all your opponents have been smaller than you. I guess that makes this your first time fighting someone bigger.”

Shichika was right—the slew of “challengers” he had taken on since crushing Hakuhei Sabi, since becoming Strongest Swordsman in Japan, were merely a distraction from the purpose of their journey, an absolute annoyance. But Togame didn’t see them as such a bad thing. He was still so inexperienced. The

more fights he fought, regardless of the circumstance, the better—fighting outside the dojos, in the open air, would surely only make him stronger. Now, the fact that Shichika was killing all these challengers was a grave problem they needed to address later, but in the meantime, every battle he fought increased their chances of succeeding in the Sword Hunt.

Except.

Among the droves of challengers, not one swordsman had stood taller than him—

Granted, no mediocre⁸⁰ meddler who showed up waving his katana posed any real threat, but maybe at least their build... No, as we just saw in the hot spring, Shichika's frame deviated greatly from the norm. Until that very day, in fact, Togame had wondered if the Kyotoryu might not be the tallest man in all Japan.

But she was wrong.

Of all people—the one man taller than him possessed a Mutant Blade.

"I had no idea that Zokuto the Armor was so big..." Togame said. "I had heard this sword was actually a massive suit of armor, but to be honest, I had written that off as a tall tale. Since you've only ever fought with guys smaller than you, I'm afraid you may not understand my meaning, Shichika...but tallness is a source of strength."

"Hahaha. I'd expect that from a runt like you, Togame."

"Cheerio!"

With a deft twist, Togame socked Shichika in the ankle as he walked over her back. Since this part of him had barely any muscle, her backfist was actually quite painful.

“Ah...I was beginning to miss your Cheerios.”

“Stuff it. Small people like me have our own way of fighting—we’re nimble and light. But it seems you take the pros of tininess for granted.”

“Yah.”

“Of course you do. You’ve never fought somebody taller than you—you’ve never been forced to fight that way. But you will be. This time, things are different. You are up against Kanara Azekura, a giant of a man.”

“Don’t you have some kind of a strategy?”

“For this sort of thing, no,” the Schemer replied decisively. “I know absolutely nothing about the martial arts. This is beyond my specialty—think for yourself.”

“Okay...”

Shichika was not untroubled to be spoken to this way, but he recognized that it was foolhardy⁸¹ of him to ask Togame for advice on such matters. She may have been commander of their journey, but when it came to battle, Shichika was the expert. He had no choice but to think this through himself.

Fighting someone bigger... He’d never given it a thought.

In fact, even when he witnessed Azekura fighting in the Basket, it had failed to cross his mind—that was how far this circumstance surpassed his expectations.

But then, something truly unexpected happened.

A voice came through the shoji—from the hallway.

“Excuse me, madam.”

From the manner of speech, it was somebody from the inn.

Togame startled⁸² at the sound. So she did understand that being witnessed

in their current state (a man stripped to the waist massaging, with his feet, a woman lying face-down in a slip) was undesirable. *Stop, stop*, she urged Shichika in furtive whispers. From the footsteps, he could tell that they were getting closer, but failing to see any issue in being caught as they were, he shook his head—*what a weirdo*. Still, he did as he was told and stepped off of his master’s back.

“Yes?” answered Togame, switching to a high-pitched (borderline shrill) voice.

“Sorry to disturb you at this hour, but a visitor is here to see you, at the front door.”

“Who might it be?” The Schemer honestly seemed to have no idea, even as she covered her slip with layer after layer of brash kimono.

“Madam,” the inn worker said, “it’s Dread⁸³ Captain Azekura—of the Armored Pirates.”

¹ 大盆 ŌBON “large tray”

² 目の粗い格子 ME NO ARAI KŌSHI a loose grid 目 ME eye; also, texture/mesh

³ 精悍 SEIKAN vigorous

⁴ 荒々しい ARA’ARASHII gruff

⁵ 兜甲冑 KABUTO KACCHŪ helm and armor; separate, though treated as a set

⁶ 生身 NAMAMI “raw flesh”

⁷ 剛剣 GŌKEN “(bearer of a) mighty sword”

⁸ 丸腰 MARUGOSHI “round-waisted” not carrying weapons (at the hip)

⁹ 特攻 TOKKŌ special attack; the official term for “kamikaze” suicide missions in WWII

¹⁰ 否崩れ INAKUZURE “not collapsing” pun on イナクスレ INAKUZURE, a font used in manga

¹¹ 一介[...]一塊 IKKAI, IKKAI an unimpressive instance / single mass, lump

¹² 布石 FUSEKI stone placement (allusion to the game of go)

¹³ 足し算引き算掛け算割り算の問題 TASHIZAN HIKIZAN KAKEZAN WARIZAN NO MONDAI question of addition subtraction multiplication division (skipping commas, works in Japanese)

¹⁴ ずたずた ZUTA ZUTA onomatopoeia for shredding

¹⁵ 粉々に砕けた、砕け散った KONAGONA NI KUDAKETA, KUDAKE CHITTA smashed to powder, smashed away

¹⁶ 逆に、いや逆にすらでない GYAKU NI, IYA GYAKU NI SURA DE NAI 逆 GYAKU opposite, reverse

¹⁷ 校倉必 AZEKURA KANARA “Unfailing Timber Storehouse” basically “brick shithouse”

¹⁸ 共感覚 KYŌKANKAKU sympathetic vibration

¹⁹ 楽しい TANOSHII fun

²⁰ 天下布武 TENKA FUBU “armed reign under the heavens” historical warlord Nobunaga Oda’s slogan

- 21 戦績 SENSEKI “war score”
- 22 手腕 SHUWAN “hand and arm” skill
- 23 浸かりすぎ TSUKARI SUGI soaking too much
- 24 禍根 KAKON “malign roots”
- 25 油断大敵 YUDAN TAITEKI “the greatest enemy is negligence” an old saying
- 26 戦々恐々 SENSEN KYŌKYŌ panic-stricken
- 27 紆余曲折 UYO KYOKUSETSU twists and turns
- 28 めでたしめでたし MEDETASHI MEDETASHI “Hooray Hoorah” めでたい MEDETAI joyous
- 29 九州 KYŪSHŪ “nine states” southernmost of Japan’s four main islands, used to have nine domains
- 30 骨休め HONE YASUME resting one’s bones
- 31 濁音 DAKUON voiced consonant
- 32 露天 ROTEN open to the elements
- 33 本州 HONSHŪ “main land” the largest of Japan’s islands 州 SHŪ state; continent, landmass
- 34 混浴 KON’YOKU “mixed bathing”
- 35 手ぬぐい TENUGUI rectangular towel/bandana
- 36 お猪口 OCHOKO a small vessel, for drinking (better) sake
- 37 日向 HINATA “where the sun shines” 日 HI day; sun 向かい MUKAI

facing

38 徳利 TOKKURI slender, narrow-necked bottle for serving sake

39 大ぽか ŌPOKA big boo-boo

40 挽回 BANKAI recover

41 窮地に陥った[...]窮余の策 KYŪCHI NI OCHI ITTA, KYŪYO NO SAKU
“desperate times calling for desperate measures” 策 SAKU plan (as in 奇策
士 KISAKUSHI Schemer)

42 鬼籍に入っていた KISEKI NI HAITTE ITA entered into the demon register
(the obituaries)

43 悪巧み WARU DAKUMI “evil design”

44 違和感をおぼえる IWAKAN WO OBOERU to register a feeling of
disharmony 和 WA harmony

45 由緒正しき由来 YUISHO TADASHIKI YURAI derives from a proper
legacy

46 地域貢献 CHIIKI KŌKEN giving back to the community

47 黙認状態 MOKUNIN JŌTAI a state of tacit approval

48 変わり者 KAWARI MONO eccentric, weirdo

49 玉鋼 TAMA HAGANE superior steel made from iron sand and carbon

50 硬さ[...]難さ KATASA, KATASA hardness vs. difficulty, tightness (as in a
tight defense)

51 鬼の首を取ったように ONI NO KUBI WO TOTTA YŌ NI as if you have
beheaded a demon

- 52 鎧通し YOROI DŌSHI passing through armor
- 53 遠当て TŌATE hitting from afar
- 54 発剋 HAKKEI explosive force
- 55 曲芸 KYOKUGEI “the art of bending” 曲がった MAGATTA curved; also, irregular
- 56 柳緑花紅 RYŪRYOKU KAKŌ “Verdure Peak” (literally, “green willow, crimson flower”)
- 57 朝顔 ASAGAO “The Morning Glory” (literally, “morning face”)
- 58 照射 SHŌSHA irradiate 照らす TERASU illuminate 射す SASU shine (in)
- 59 戦略家 SENRYAKUKA military tactician
- 60 込み入った[...]絡み合った KOMI’ITTA, KARAMI’ATTA involved / interconnected
- 61 利益 RI’EKI profit
- 62 野試合 NOJI’AI match staged “on the fly” (vs. hosted by a dojo)
- 63 及第点を出す KYŪDAITEN WO DASU issue a passing grade
- 64 脱兎のごとく逃げる DATTO NO GOTOKU NIGERU “escape like bolting rabbits”
- 65 少数精鋭 SHŌSŪ SEI’EI an elite few
- 66 処理 SHORI process; tend to
- 67 搦め手 KARAME TE through the back door
- 68 お飾り OKAZARI decoration

69 難癖 NANKUSE criticize (unfairly)

70 とっくり TOKKURI onomatopoeia for exhaustive (vs. the phallic 徳利 TOKKURI carafe)

71 じろじろ JIRO JIRO onomatopoeia for staring, ogling

72 がらりと GARARI TO onomatopoeia for extreme change, evoking a stage turning

73 虫の知らせ MUSHI NO SHIRASE “message from a bug” a feeling something will happen

74 按摩 ANMA the old, native term; also means (the traditionally, blind) “masseur/se”

75 日本最強志願 NIHON SAIKYŌ SHIGAN hoping/volunteering to be Japan’s strongest

76 変態的な匂い HENTAI TEKI NA NIOI scent of perversion

77 穴がある ANA GA ARU “to have holes in it”

78 情報収集 JŌHŌ SHŪSHŪ fact-finding

79 がき GAKI little rascal

80 程度の知れた TEIDO NO SHIRETA run of the mill

81 無謀 MUBŌ reckless

82 びくっと BIKUTTO onomatopoeia for sudden movement

83 さま SAMA “dread” takes liberty, but more deferential/reverent than さん SAN Mr./Mrs.

CHAPTER
TWO
KANARA
AZEKURA



They beat us to it, thought Togame ruefully.

She would never have expected him to show up where they stayed—of course, this was just the sort of thing Togame should have been expecting, but it was a little late for that. Now that Shichika Yasuri had demolished Hakuhei Sabi and become the Strongest in Japan, he was no longer a nobody¹—as proven by the swarm of goons who challenged him en route. It was a long way from Ganryu Island down to Dakuon Harbor in Satsuma—but word got out. Dakuon was not the only part of Kyushu where pirates maintained a presence. They occupied the whole of Kyushu. They had their networks. It was only a matter of time.

Togame had been careless.

That wasn't like her.

Once they had captured Zetto the Leveler from Komori Maniwa and Hakuto the Whisper from Hakuhei Sabi and reclaimed the Mutant Blades stolen on her watch, Togame had gone a bit too easy on herself—but it was too late now.

Things² had escalated far beyond her expectations—



Up close, the man was unbelievably enormous—to the point that it was almost funny. The room where Togame and Shichika were staying was a good size for two people, but Kanara Azekura took up more than half—okay, maybe I’m exaggerating.

Point is, he was undoubtedly a giant—but the Armor exaggerated this impression. It was immediately clear³ that Azekura was taller than Shichika, but the pirate captain was also significantly broader—he stood one or two heads taller than Shichika, which was plenty, but with Shichika as skinny as he was, Azekura was at least twice as broad across the chest.

—Literally a wall.

In the eyes of Shichika.

He was an iron wall.

A suit of silver armor.

Clad head to toe.

Unparalleled in armor class—yes.

He could feel it.

What Togame had referred to as “lifeforce or whatever”—was a certainty, like reuniting with a long-lost sibling.

This was Zokuto the Armor, he was certain.

“Well?”

Togame must have been shaken to the core by this unexpected escalation,

but she maintained her composure. Azekura had his Armor, but she had hers, her brash and brilliant robes, and she sat up on a pillow, one knee up, betraying not a trace of drunkenness. Even from below, Togame managed to look down on Azekura.

“And what business does Kanara Azekura, Captain of the Armored Pirates, and effective ruler of this village, have with a couple of travelers like us?”

“...”

Ah, I see. Shichika nodded to himself behind Togame. *So this is her approach.* Shichika had not been party to her negotiations with Meisai Tsuruga at Triad Shrine, but this was largely because Meisai wore no sword. This time around, it was the other way around. Azekura literally wore a sword. It covered his entire body.

With Azekura and Togame seated, Shichika was the only person standing in the room. Behind Togame, ready to protect her.

Nevertheless.

Shichika may have stood while Azekura sat, but he felt incredibly intimidated⁴ by the Captain’s size. It almost blew away the lifeforce that he felt when up against a Shikizaki blade—

He had not taken seriously the warning that Togame had given him a few minutes earlier, but now Shichika could see exactly how the difference in size would exert considerable influence on their battle...

Tea had been left for the three of them.

Tea for Togame, Shichika, and Azekura.

Nobody had asked, but the inn had brought it all the same—it should go

without saying this inn was under the control of the Armored Pirates. Which explains why the inn worker had called the guest “Dread Captain Azekura.”

Shichika wondered:

How could this guy drink tea wearing armor?

Holding off on that for now—Azekura answered Togame.

“What? No, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it business.”

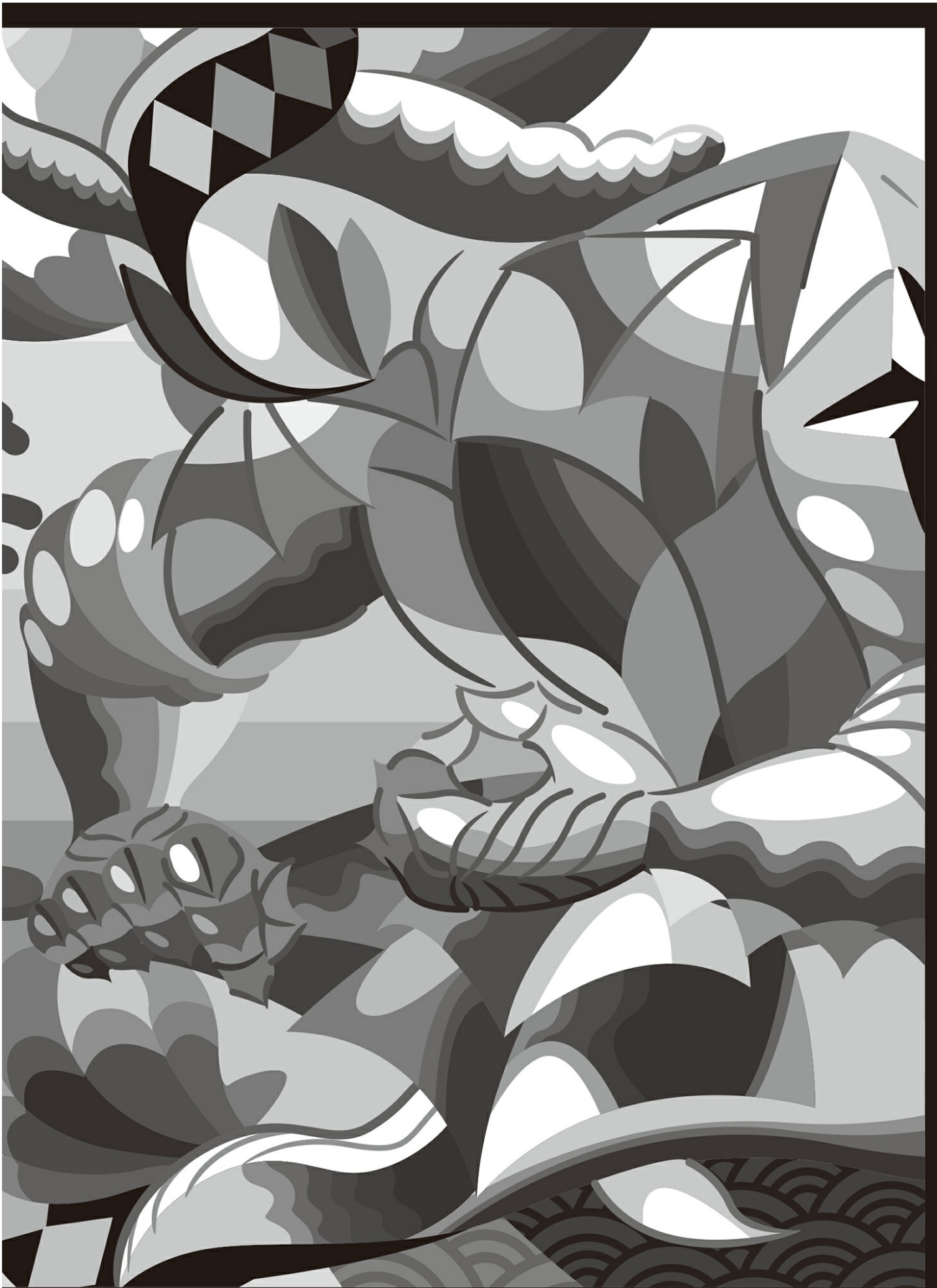
His voice boomed, just as when he had addressed the hotshot swordsman in their fight back at the Basket.

“Gah ha ha—I thought as much when I spotted you at the Basket, but up close, I can see that you are quite the little sweetie⁵—the color of your hair is stunning.”

“...”

From where he stood, Shichika sensed that Togame was not happy with this brazen compliment. He had only realized recently, but it seemed the Schemer did not like it when people talked about her looks.⁶ By now she was accustomed to comments about her hair of white, but they were all the same—a compliment unwelcome as an insult.





She didn't seem to mind when people remarked on other aspects of her. This went beyond not being able to take a compliment or being bashful.

Togame was not so bad at lying as to let Azekura notice this reaction, which depending on one's interpretation could be taken as a sign of weakness. Shichika had only sensed it because he was so ready to defend her and had spent so much time beside her thus far on their journey. Nothing changed about her on the surface; she answered in kind—

“Why thank you. Your armor is quite stunning as well.”

And repeated her question:

“Now tell me, what business brings you here?”

Azekura gave her the same answer.

“I told you, I wouldn't really call it business...”

He was casual,⁷ almost as if he was teasing her, but something confused Shichika. There was no way of telling with his Armor on—but how old was Kanara Azekura? He had to be way older than Shichika, and maybe even older than Togame.

“Is it not somewhat unusual for the captain of a band of pirates such as yourself to show up in a place like this without accompaniment?”

“Spare the formalities—talk normal.”⁸ Gah ha ha—you want to know why I showed up unaccompanied? Do I look like I need backup? I've never felt the need to be accompanied. But a little company?” laughed Azekura bawdily. “That's a different story.”

“Ah, my apologies,” said Togame, adjusting her tone. “But I'd still like to know what brings you here—Dread⁹ Captain Azekura. Calling on two simple travelers.”

“You’re more than simple travelers,” returned Azekura.

His voice reverberated in the Armor, making it somewhat hard to understand him, but with a booming voice like that, they had no trouble hearing him.

“I know you—Lady Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate—and Lord Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, who having vanquished Hakuhei Sabi on Ganryu Island has earned himself the title of Strongest Swordsman in Japan, however swordless he may be—and you call yourselves simple travelers?”

“...”

Togame was silent.

This was unexpected. It seemed that Azekura had done his homework before paying them a visit at the inn. It made sense for him to hear the news about Shichika, but to learn the entirety of Togame’s title—word must have traveled all too fast.

Through the pirate networks...

But if he knew that much already, of course—

“On a Sword Hunt, isn’t that right?” Azekura cut to the chase. “No need to probe¹⁰—I’m a Kyushu boy, born and raised in Satsuma. As you already know, and can plainly see, I own Zokuto the Armor, one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki—and let me guess, you’re here to take me down? Steal the Armor, over my dead body?”

“Well...”

Togame held off on answering for the moment.

For once, she was unsure of what to say.

In this respect, perhaps it was no blessing after all for them to witness Azekura fighting at the Basket so soon after their arrival... Just as Togame and Shichika had seen Azekura, he must have caught sight of Togame and Shichika.

Shichika recalled the instant where it seemed that he and Azekura had met eyes.

He may have won himself the name of Strongest Swordsman in Japan, but it was doubtful that his image¹¹ had preceded him. Far more likely, it had been Togame's white hair that stood out...

Indeed, the challengers that stopped them on the way seem to have used Togame's hair to spot them. Her sumptuous finery must have tipped them off as well, but let's just say that she was hard to miss.

And yet, there was no way that Shichika could make her cut her hair... He was an island monkey, half-naked and lanky, impossible to miss himself, unqualified to offer tips on fashion.

"Maybe we are—but so what?"

After thinking things over, Togame had turned his question right back at him. "You guys are pirates. Plundering on the high seas. If you tell me that you don't like being stolen from, I may just lose my lunch."¹²

"Point taken," Azekura said, relishing her provocation. "If you hurt others, you're asking to be hurt, and if you steal, you're asking to be stolen from—same goes for killing, and being killed."

"Asking for it?"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

Azekura seemed momentarily suspicious, but he seemed like the type to brush off details.

“Alright,” he nodded, and went on. “Make no mistake—*I’m not trying to beat you to the punch.*”

“Words are cheap.”

While he had said there was no need to probe, he spoke as if he already knew exactly what she had in mind. Yet Togame, betraying no sign of distress, merely gave him a wry look and answered, “I see right through you. Your men have the inn surrounded, and the two of us are fish in a barrel¹³—for all I know, there’s even something in this tea.”

“I already told you. I came here unaccompanied—”

“Sure you did.”

Togame shrugged off Azekura’s disavowal.

Now Shichika had seen it all. If Azekura in the Armor was enormous in his eyes, he was by no exaggeration a true giant to Togame, so slight and frail that he could easily flatten her. Dread¹⁴ Captain Azekura, owner of the Armor, was a sight to see, but even more spectacular was the way Togame showed¹⁵ him who was boss.

I guess all that I can do is stand here and be ready for whatever happens.

Her diplomacy could easily devolve just like it had with Ginkaku Uneri. It may sound ludicrous to be so cautious about Azekura, who wore the Armor but was otherwise unarmed—and yet the Armor was not armor, but a sword.

Not protection, but a weapon.

If you looked closely, you could discern what Togame had described when

they were sitting in the hot spring: the edges of the Armor were sharpened—

I see it now. A body blow from those won't be pleasant.

He recalled the shredded figure of the hotshot swordsman flying through the air—and the ruin¹⁶ of his massive sword, bashed to dust.

Then again, a body blow from somebody so giant would be lethal, armed or not.

“Shichika.”

“...”

“Shichika. Shichika.”

“...”

“Cheerio!”

Togame spun around and whammed him in the kneecap with her elbow.

Her “punch lines”¹⁷ were becoming a little too diverse.

“Huh...what?”

“What do you mean ‘what’? Quit daydreaming. This concerns you, too, listen carefully.”

He hadn't been daydreaming, but he'd been transfixed by Azekura and his Armor. “I'm sorry,” Shichika apologized.

It was fine to stand there, ready for whatever happened, but if he missed what the two of them were saying in the process, he missed the point.

“The Kyotoryu...” said Azekura. “I know about you. I thought it might be fun to fight the Hero of the Rebellion, but if you're the Seventh Master, that must mean Mutsue Yasuri has retired. Seems a bit too young for that.”

“My father is dead.”

These were Shichika’s first words to Azekura.

“Which means—”

But *how he died*—was a secret no one knew.

Don’t be so careless—he remembered now how Meisai Tsuruga had warned him.

Nanami had warned him as well, before he even set off on the Sword Hunt: *Don’t tell Miss Togame how you’ve killed our dad too.*

“He’s dead—I mean, he died.”

Shichika was not so good at lying. It would be hard to imagine a conversation any more awkward, but Azekura did not seem suspicious. Togame, for her part, appeared noticeably flummoxed, but at the moment our focus is elsewhere—

Azekura spoke.

“I had heard the Kyotoryu was strong, but I had no idea that you were strong enough to singlehandedly take down the Strongest Swordsman in Japan.”

“You’re familiar with Hakuhei Sabi?”

“Yeah...I’m no swordsman, but the Armor is a sword. He caught my interest—I dreamed of one day fighting Sabi in the Basket. *To truly be the Strongest in Japan, he would have to get through me.*”

“ ... ”

“And when I heard that this guy *somehow came into possession* of Hakuto the Whisper—another of the Twelve Possessed, like Zokuto the Armor—the dream grew even stronger. One Mutant Blade versus another. Which would prove superior? I had hoped to settle the matter sooner than later, but the two of you

beat me to the punch.”

“You sure are belligerent,” Togame spoke her mind, taking no pains to conceal her disgust.¹⁸ “But what should I expect—from the captain of a band of pirates?”

“Don’t be foolish¹⁹—from birth, men want to know who’s stronger, and who we stand above—it’s how we tick. You can’t expect to call yourself the Strongest in Japan—without asking for a challenge.”

Azekura nodded at Shichika.

But Shichika was unsure how to respond.

Asking?

“I would have to agree,” Togame said, and for a moment closed her eyes. She was handling her debate with Azekura marvelously, refusing to yield an inch—but still hadn’t decided how to address this development.

One thing was for sure, rolling with the punches was no longer viable. It had become necessary to try something more aggressive.²⁰

Togame the Schemer.

This was her chance to show²¹ what she was made of.

“I must say, the scope of your pirate network is impressive—I never imagined word would spread like this about our moves. Am I to understand, Dread Captain Azekura, that you even know how many of the Twelve Possessed are ours by now?”

“Four,” Azekura answered plainly. “Zetto the Leveler, Zanto the Razor, Sento the Legion, and Hakuto the Whisper, which you just won from Hakuhei Sabi. I have no clue how you got your hands on the first one, Zetto the Leveler—but for

the second and the third, I even know the names of their last owners. Ginkaku Uneri and Meisai Tsuruga.”

“Hm...yes, I suppose you are correct,” Togame said aloofly.

She was only trying to surmise how much Azekura knew. She hadn’t meant it to be a heavy question.

However.

Evidently—Azekura didn’t know how they had obtained Zetto the Leveler.

For Togame, this was food for thought.

Azekura had no reason to be honest with her, and she had no reason to take his words at face value²²—but assuming he was telling the truth. From the sound of it, the Armored Pirates had gathered no intelligence on the Maniwa Ninja Clan, and Azekura didn’t know exactly how Sabi had wound up with Hakuto the Whisper.

The pirate captain didn’t have the full story.

Which means—they stood a chance?

“And yet,” Togame said deliberately, “the more I hear the more confused I get—Dread Captain Azekura. You know exactly who we are, and you know why we’re here. So what would prompt the owner of Zokuto the Armor to pay us a visit?”

It couldn’t possibly be to offer up the Armor in tribute to the bakufu—Togame was finally getting down to business. They had to quit the pleasantries sooner or later. At this point, there was no turning back.

Even if Azekura’s men had the inn surrounded—

“Seriously?” laughed Azekura. “You expect me to cooperate with the bakufu?”

To a pirate, that is suicide—antiestablishmentarianism²³ is nothing less than our banner. As long as there is water in the ocean, we won't be caught dead currying favor with the government...but there is one thing I wanted to ask you—Togame.”

Not Lady Togame.

Togame.

Azekura dropped the formalities.

The bakufu and the pirates were rivals, but Azekura's informality came across as overly familiar.

“If you were somehow to succeed, and prized Zokuto the Armor from my dead body—what next? As far as I know, the Armor is the only one of the Twelve Possessed in all of Kyushu—if there was another, you can bet your life that I would hear about it.”

“Ears peeled, huh.”²⁴

“Just a careful listener. Well? I'm curious to hear where you're off to next. Now that you've beaten your way through western Japan—will you hop over to Shikoku?”²⁵

“No. *In the event* we dispossess you, Dread Captain Azekura, of the Armor—we plan to pay a long-overdue visit to Owari Castle. I've been away from home for ages now...and who wants the help to see more of their house than they do?”

“By land? Or by sea.”

“This is a harbor after all. We'd like to go by sea, if possible. There must be boats out of Dakuon bound for Owari.”

“Yeah—but not only Owari. You can go to Tosa in Shikoku, and the Capital, and

the rest of Japan, from Edo up to Mt. Shirei...as far south as the Ryukyu Islands, or as far north as Ezo. Hence why I chose this port for my base of operations—while it's no Dejima Island²⁶ in Nagasaki, it's undoubtedly one of the prime harbors of the nation. However—”

Azekura paused.

“If you do manage to steal the Armor, are you sure that you can make it out of Dakuon alive?”

“...”

The chores of triumph.²⁷

Oddly enough, this was exactly what Togame had been getting at back in the hot spring—the second biggest problem they were up against, after Azekura being giant.

This man was extremely—informed.

He wasn't just the first to know, he was deeply perceptive.²⁸

With his great size and booming voice, Azekura didn't seem like the type to sweat the details, and he probably did overlook the nitty gritty, and saw the world in broad brushstrokes—but that did not mean he was not a thinking man.

Despite his claims—

Perhaps he actually had beaten them to the punch.

Here to crush them, before they proved a nuisance...

What else would he do when he got word that someone sought the Armor? It was the very namesake of the Armored Pirates—if they lost it, their authority would necessarily wane, along with their grip on the harbor. He had to nip this in the bud.

Judging from his nonchalance, Azekura had dealt with any number of contenders for the Armor—in fact, how could Togame and Shichika be the first? Great Sword Hunt or no, one of Kiki Shikizaki's Mutant Blades could buy a country. And even if the Maniwa never made it this far south, the Armor could not have gone wholly uncontested—

“Alright, I'll cut you a deal.”

What?

She had not expected this from Azekura.

“Deal?”

Togame knit her brows.

Never in the history of the world²⁹ has a proposal lobbed at someone as a “deal” wound up being a true bargain for the recipient. More often than not, you wind up with a lemon, dressed up like a golden egg.³⁰

Togame braced herself.

“Let's hear it. This better be good.”

“It's good alright... Either way, no loss for the bakufu.”

Azekura raised a finger wrapped in steel and pointed straight at Shichika. Though left out of the conversation for some time, he was not spacing out—but being called on flustered him.

“Huh, what?”

“Kyotoryu,” Azekura said, unfazed. “Let's have a duel.”

“...”

Shichika was dumbfounded; you could hear it in his voice, but Togame must

have felt the same about this exchange that bypassed her.

“A d-duel?”

“Precisely. On the off chance that you win, I’ll hand over the Armor. And I’ll see to it that none of the pirates and nobody in town gets in your way. I swear by the god of the sea to send you on your way back to Owari.”

“God of the sea? What the hell,” Togame muttered under her breath.

Of course, she had no interest in the sea god—her mind was occupied with the deal that Azekura had proposed.

The duel had been proposed by him.

And he had promised to take care of things thereafter.

Taken at face value, this was a lucky deal indeed. But any way you looked—

“It sounds too good to be true.” There was nothing else to say. “I can’t help but think there must be a catch.”

“No catch—although of course I have a handful of conditions. I heard about all of the lowlifes that you fought along the way, you took on anyone who stopped you. I can’t imagine you’d deny me, Kyotoryu.”

“Huh? Oh, no—”

“Cheerio!”

Togame spun and whammed her elbow into Shichika, once again.

He hadn’t even tried to dodge the blow—the figure of devotion.³¹

But Togame was not about to extol his devotion. Instead, she chewed him out.

“Don’t just agree, you colossal idiot! Use your head.”

“Nice to meet a happy couple...” Azekura let a laugh slip from inside the Armor. He was having fun with them.

His remark made Togame come to her senses. She turned to Azekura.

“And what might these conditions be?” she asked him sternly. “Don’t tell me that you, a pirate at large, wants a pardon³²—unless you’re planning to step out³³ of the game.”

“Please. Do you think I’m so free of freedom³⁴ that I need a hand from you? I didn’t mean anything that ludicrous—I just want to save face.”³⁵

“Face?”

“Yup. Not to sound cocky, but I’m the face of this whole region—not just Dakuon Harbor. Down here, my authority is absolute.”

“Not to sound cocky or anything,” Togame shrugged sarcastically.³⁶

She meant for this to slow the conversation down, so she could take a moment to observe how he reacted—but things did not proceed as she hoped. His armor perfectly concealed his visage and kept her from perusing his expression.

“Gah ha ha, so you see, I can’t be the one to propose the duel—for the sake of the town, and the sake of my men.”

“...”

“This is one of our taboos.³⁷ Dueling³⁸ is banned among the Armored Pirates—if I intentionally enter into a duel, I would set a bad example, as Captain.”

“Dueling is banned?” echoed Shichika, doubtfully. Perhaps the lawless associations of the word “pirate” failed to accord with the idea of an ethical

code.

“Nothing special,” Togame explained, without turning around. “If everyone did whatever they wanted, the organization would fall apart. To maintain the integrity of a group, some degree of law is necessary—especially if you want people to like you.”

“Wow, that stings—for your information, popularity isn’t what I’m after.”

“Oh yeah? What about the Basket.”

“That has nothing to do with being popular—it’s a business. Lately it’s been even more profitable than the plundering, I’m sorry to say. Pretty soon they’ll start calling us an ocean rodeo³⁹—oh, right.”

It sounded like he thought of something.

“When we have this duel, I want for it to happen in the Basket.”

“Why?”

The Basket.

Why fight on enemy territory—Togame had been hoping to avoid the venue.

“Why? Didn’t I just say? Duels are forbidden. If I fight you at the Basket, it’s strictly business. Plus, regardless of who wins or loses, the audience will be ecstatic to see me fight the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, especially if he doesn’t have a sword—come on, you’re from the government. Do your part in helping out the regional economy.”

“You want to show off Shichika as some kind of a freak?”

“Small price to pay, if it means you get the Armor—am I wrong?”

“...”

She had nothing to say.

You see—he wasn't wrong.

If Shichika was forced to fight him on his turf, that wouldn't help his chances—yet.

Things still sounded too good to be true.

“But at the Basket—I'm assuming not just any drifter can show up and fight.”

“Wrong. At the Basket, we leave the door⁴⁰ wide open—the Armored Pirates welcome everybody, even drifters. You remember who I fought in the battle where you saw me...the hotshot swordsman with the massive sword? That guy was still in training, a nobody. Said he just happened to be passing through. But one false move on my part, and that rookie would have been next in line to fight you, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan!”

“...”

They even welcomed drifters.

This caught Togame by surprise.

But the flip side was that Azekura, Maestro⁴¹ of the Basket, was so resolutely confident that he welcomed even total strangers into his arena.

“That kid put up a good fight... He only earned the right to fight me after beating five of my men in a row. Probably the best no-name fighter we've hosted at the Basket in a while. Some good that did him, though,” laughed Azekura. “Now he's a dead nobody.”

“The right to fight you... You're popular, and the star of the show. So to challenge the reigning champion⁴² of the Basket, one needs to pass a test...I see. Well, do we have what it takes to challenge you?”

“Don’t play dumb—I know this guy’s the Strongest in Japan.”

“For the past month. Barely enough time to prove it—right, Shichika?”

“Hm? Ah, yeah, sure...”

Shichika had been warned not to simply nod along, but he could only answer vaguely. Things were getting complicated. He no longer had a clue what Togame wanted, or what she was planning to do.

“Well, all I can say is, maybe.”

“Bull—how could amassing four of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki be anything but proof? I’ve heard the Mutant Blades lorded over the Age of Warring States. The power of each domain was measured by the quantity of Shikizaki blades in its possession. I have one, and you have four—based purely on the numbers, you outrank me, even if I am the champion. I need for you to make the challenge, though, as a formality,” concluded Azekura. “To protect the image of the Armored Pirates, and my image as Captain.”

“But what about the crowd, Dread Captain Azekura? You only know about the ‘proof’ you speak of through the grapevine of your pirate network—I doubt simply making an announcement would suffice.”

“No, you’re right about that—but as they say, seeing is believing.⁴³ Five men is overkill...three’s plenty.”

Azekura thrust three fingers at them.

Three fingers, every single knuckle clad in steel.

“Let’s have a special match down at the Basket. Say tomorrow. Beat three men in a row, and you earn yourself the right to fight the champion. Usually, I have eight men fighting for me—but that hotshot friend of ours beat five of

them. Three's all I have on hand."

"And if Shichika beats those three men and beats you, Dread Captain Azekura, he gets to take home Zokuto the Armor as a trophy?"

"Exactly. To keep the fights from being fixed,⁴⁴ the victors normally walk away with no more than a feather in their hat, but for you, I'll make an exception. Since I'm the actual challenger, I may as well throw you a bone."

"Special match... But don't you host fights every other week? You sure do as you please."

"I'm running the show. Gah ha ha!" Azekura laughed heartily. "Goes to show how bad I want to fight you guys. Trust me, I'd love to be more open about this, but there are these bores who'd raise a fuss. As an entrepreneur,⁴⁵ I'll admit that I quite like the idea of using a Master of the Kyotoryu to sell tickets."

"..."

Togame thought in silence.

It had sounded too good to be true, but the deal seemed more plausible now. Azekura could feign deference to Shichika, calling him the Strongest Swordsman in Japan and whatnot, but if the Captain was certain he'd never lose—it made sense. And as the Maestro of the Basket, he wanted to use Shichika to make up for the five men beaten by the hotshot swordsman—however.

Was that a good enough reason for Kanara Azekura to put one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki on the line? Pugnacious as he was, perhaps he truly only wanted to try his hand at Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—

The venom of the swords.

The venom of the blades of Kiki Shikizaki—

Swordsman or not, it must have made its way into Kanara Azekura's system—

It made sense that he needed to protect his reputation, as the head honcho in town. At the same time, a man of his reputation would have to honor his word—was he sure about making such a promise?

Togame had to be missing something.

She understood—but she was missing something.

“Far as I can see, Dread Captain Azekura—you've left an important question unaddressed.”

“Which is?”

“You've mentioned that if our side wins, Zokuto the Armor will be ours...and you will guarantee our safe return—but what happens if we lose?”

“Poor things,” mocked Azekura. “You're worried about what will happen if you lose? Sounds like you've already lost to me.”

“If we lose to you, Dread Captain Azekura...or if we fail to win all three of these qualifying matches...what price will we pay for our defeat? I can't imagine you would let us get away scot-free. Not when you're betting the Armor.”

She had phrased it as a question, but she saw where this was going—the Captain had to have a motive, and Togame had a hunch as to what it was. In a word, he wanted them to up the ante⁴⁶ by wagering the four Mutant Blades in their possession.

Zetto the Leveler. Zanto the Razor. Sento the Legion. Hakuto the Whisper.

To throw their four swords—all four of them—into the pot.

There was no other way to balance his outrageous wager.

The venom of the swords—

It was natural for the owner of a Mutant Blade to thirst for more. In fact, Togame had approached Meisai Tsuruga, their third opponent, with a similar proposition—although it must be said that the Mistress of Triad Shrine had been fighting for a better cause...

Kanara Azekura was a pirate.

For whom taking what he wanted by force was only natural—

“How insightful of you.”

And yet.

What Azekura said after this compliment entirely defied her expectations.

“If I win, Togame—I want you to be mine.”

“...?”

This development stunned her.

“Wha—don’t you want the swords?”

“Swords? Who needs a bunch of swords—this one is plenty. All I want is you,” boomed Azekura. “I fell for you the second that I saw you. Be my girl.”



While Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, conferred with Kanara Azekura inside the inn, someone was peering through the windows from the dark.

Contrary to Togame’s fears, the inn was not surrounded by a squad of Armored Pirates—no, this person seemed to be alone.

He was young.

Tall and slender, long black hair cascading down his back. Expressionless—and yet his eyes possessed a glint of violence.

“...”

A while now had passed since Kanara Azekura entered the inn, in all his armored glory—by now, the pirate captain was quite engrossed in conversation.

“Poor timing... Might need to hold off. Until the time is ripe.”

The interloper uttered these words too quietly for anyone to hear—and left the inn behind.

Blending instantly into the darkness.

Sleeveless ninja garb.

Chains wrapped around his body. A strange man indeed.

¹ 無名 MUMEI “no name”

² 事態 JITAI situation, circumstances

³ 一目瞭然 ICHIMOKU RYŌZEN blatantly obvious at first sight

⁴ 威圧感 IATSUKAN overpowerment

⁵ 可憐な KAREN NA cute, lovely, dainty

⁶ 容姿 YŌSHI physical appearance

⁷ 捌けている SABAKETE IRU easygoing; patient

⁸ ため語 TAMEGO style of speech among friendly peers

⁹ どの DONO lord/lady, strictly speaking (Azekura uses the same honorific for Togame)

¹⁰ 腹の探りあい HARA NO SAGURI'AI “go searching each other's stomachs”

¹¹ 人相書き NINSŌGAKI personal description (of a suspect)

¹² 噴飯もの FUNPAN MONO “meal-blowing”

¹³ 袋のねずみ FUKURO NO NEZUMI rats in a sack

¹⁴ 名高き NADAKAKI renowned

¹⁵ 舞台度胸 BUTAI DOKYŌ stage nerve

¹⁶ 成れの果て NARE NO HATE the result/end of becoming

¹⁷ 突っ込み TSUKKOMI “thrusting in” retort, usu. delivered by the straight man in a comedy routine

¹⁸ 呆れ AKIRE being appalled

¹⁹ 愚問だな GUMON DANA “that's a stupid question”

²⁰ 強引 GŌIN “pull hard”

²¹ 見せどころ MISEDOKORO showcase (often, in a theatrical work)

²² 頭から ATAMA KARA “head-on”

²³ 反権力反体制 HANKENRYOKU HANTAISEI “anti-power, antiestablishment”

²⁴ 地獄耳 JIGOKU MIMI “hell ears” clairaudience; able to pick up voices,

in particular

25 四国 SHIKOKU “four countries” the smallest of Japan’s four main islands; had four domains

26 出島 DEJIMA the sole point of direct trade with the outside world during the Edo period

27 勝戦処理 SHŌSEN SHORI neologism that plays on 敗戦処理 HAISEN SHORI mopping up a loss

28 洞察力 DŌSATSURYOKU “power to see into a cave”

29 古今東西 KOKON TŌZAI “now as before, from east to west”

30 権謀術数 KENBŌ JUSSŪ manipulations

31 忠義者 CHŪGI MONO loyal comrade/servant

32 お目こぼし OMEKOBOSHI look the other way

33 足を洗う ASHI WO ARAU “wash one’s feet” mending one’s evil ways

34 自由に不自由 JIYŪ NI FUJIYŪ deprived of liberty

35 面子 MENTSU face (as in honor) derived from the Chinese word *mianzi*

36 わざとらしく WAZATO RASHIKU artificially

37 ご法度 GOHATTO prohibition an Edo-era term

38 私闘 SHITŌ private fighting

39 陸海賊 OKA KAIZOKU “land pirates” phonies

40 門戸 MONKO gated entrance

41 主催者 SHUSAISHA sponsor, host

42 王者 ŌJA ruler

43 百聞は一見にしかず HYAKUBUN WA IKKEN NI SHIKAZU “one look is worth a hundred rumors”

44 八百長 YAOCHŌ rigged match

45 商売人 SHŌBAI NIN businessperson

46 賭け金 KAKEKIN stakes

CHAPTER THREE

HOHOH
MANIWA





Either way, no loss for the bakufu—asserted Kanara Azekura. To recap, his offer could be summarized as follows.

If Shichika bested Azekura in the duel—as goes without saying, things would go as Togame had envisioned. The Armor would be theirs, and for the time being, they would be safe. And while the execution was slightly different from what she had in mind, this was basically the essence of her scheme, the single complication being Shichika battling Azekura at the Basket, the pirate captain’s home turf.

Conversely, if Shichika lost the fight at the Basket, or went down to defeat in any manner, that is, *even if Azekura was the victor in the duel, Togame would be fine*—or so he claimed.

No, he made his opinion even clearer.

“Honestly, you’re better off that way.”

Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, had been hired by Togame on this Sword Hunt as her bodyguard—his job was to win every fight. Losing was not an option.

Losing was grounds for dismissal.

Azekura pointed a proud finger at himself.

“Yet it won’t be any loss for you. Not if you’re my girl—of course, that means that I’ll be taking over.”

Taking over.

As her bodyguard.

“But why settle for just being your bodyguard? By now I’ve done plenty, more than plenty to assure you of the power of the Armored Pirates’ intelligence network. Who could be more useful to you on your Sword Hunt?”

He had no intention of deferring¹ to the bakufu.

But there was no greater pleasure in life than working hard for your baby²—Azekura certainly felt this way.

“Frankly, this whole thing about wanting to fight the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—while not exactly an excuse, is no more than a justification. When I heard the posse³ hunting for the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki had come to town, I was of a mind to show them who was boss, but when I set my eyes on you, I had a change of heart. I felt driven to serve you.”

With his help, she would have the other seven swords in no time, Azekura went so far as to claim.

“Don’t expect me to hand over the Armor—but if you’re my woman, you can consider yourself its owner. I’ll just be borrowing it. How’s that for an arrangement? In all of Japan, who other than Kanara Azekura is big enough to fit inside?”

When Togame declined to gratify this with an answer, he added this flourish: “As a strategist, surely you understand how sweet a deal this is?”



The next day.

In the room they had taken at the hot spring inn.

The two travelers stood quite close, facing each other. Togame was fully dressed in a luxurious kimono (having packed such an extensive wardrobe she had nary worn the same thing twice—although Shichika was the one who bore the burden). Hands clasped behind her head, feet together, she stood up straight, looking uneasy. Shichika stood right in front of her, bent deep at the knees, to lower his enormous body. His feet faced to the side—he twisted his torso so extremely that he nearly turned his back on Togame, who stood motionless before him.

One hand made a fist.

His far hand, from Togame's perspective.

The other hand was open, spread over the fist—indeed.

In Kyotoryu Form Four, the Asagao.

“Hup.”

After holding this position for some time, suddenly.

Shichika moved—his body moved.

In a single motion, he unspun from the twist, without changing the position of his feet! As if launching a cannonball, he hurled his fist straight for Togame's

stomach—a move similar to Fatal Orchid One, Kyoka Suigetsu, the secret move playing off Form One, the Suzuran, deployed at Triad Shrine against Meisai Tsuruga, then owner of Sento the Legion. But in this secret move, he made a fist.

“Fatal Orchid Four—Ryuryoku Kako!”

His fist smashed into Togame’s obi.

But not through it—his fist halted where it made contact, even as his torso glided in the opposite direction as a result. This wasn’t stopping an inch short⁴—his fist did press into the middle of her obi.

And that was all, apparently.

Togame registered no reaction, but for a rapid inhalation—*phew*—and a cold sweat.

“Did it work?”

“Not sure... I’ll have to check.”

When Shichika asked the question, Togame unclasped her hands and reached around her back to pull out the little mirror she had stashed at the knot of her obi. The woman was surprisingly dexterous and flexible.

At any rate—

“Hmm...see for yourself.”

Togame held the mirror out to Shichika.

The glass⁵ was cracked, and the handle had bent.

“Impressive—also a shame, although I guess it’s too late for that. This mirror cost me a fortune... Oh well.”

Shichika, who until this moment had been frozen with his fist pressed into her stomach, seemed relieved. His face was just below eye level with Togame, but when he stood up straight, he towered over her.

“I barely ever get a chance to use the Ryuryoku Kako... The secret move only makes sense when you’re fighting someone wearing armor. I’d hate to think I’ve gotten rusty. I just never have a chance to practice it. Sorry for practicing on you.”

“I can take it... I dunno though. How does this work? Does this mean you can concentrate the damage wherever you like?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. I can stop at the skin, or the muscle, or the organs, or the bones—or even go through to the other side. My dad always said the hardest part about this secret move was transmitting⁶ the impact. I have to use my intuition.”

“Intuition? That’s all that stood between me and your fist?!”

Togame was irate.

If she had known better, she would not have been so helpful.

No surprise from a woman who prided herself on being weak as shoji paper.

This time, however, she owed a compliment to Shichika and the secrets of the Kyotoryu. The shoji paper was unscathed; nothing damaged but the little mirror stashed behind her obi.

“Ugh, I feel like there’s pieces of the mirror in my obi. We’ll have to untie it... Go on, Shichika.”

She turned her back to him and raised her arms. As proven a moment ago, she was more than flexible enough to undo her own kimono, but lately she

delegated tasks like this to Shichika. At first it took him time, but with practice, he had grasped the fundamentals⁷ of attiring kimono—though there was plenty left for him to learn.

Time to change her obi.

Shichika started to undo the knot.

“...”

Once it was undone, he tugged with all his might.

“Waah?”

When Shichika tugged at the obi wrapped around her waist, Togame spun forth at great speed like a top. Swept off her feet, she fell face down on the tatami.

“What the hell?!”

“Sorry...for some reason I felt like teasing you.”

“Shichika!” Togame came to her feet unsteadily. “With your superhuman strength, a little teasing is enough to do me in.” Since her obi was undone, her clothing was in disarray, but she paid it no need. She seemed awfully dizzy.

“Honestly...what on earth were you thinking?”

“Togame.”

“Yes?”

“That offer the guy made yesterday—how do you feel about it?”

Kanara Azekura’s offer.

Togame hadn’t accepted—or refused him outright.

Here is what she had told the man:

“Tomorrow is out of the question. That’s far too soon, I need some time to think. I mistrust negotiations that proceed at a clip,⁸ whether I like the sound of it or not—give me a day to think it over. Come back tomorrow night. By then, I’ll have an answer.”

Dread Captain Azekura and Shichika would need to wait another day before they dueled—

Togame had cut off the talks, and Azekura wasn’t one to overstay his welcome in that case. He did tell her, “I’m too busy to come back tomorrow, so I’ll send one of my underlings instead,” before departing from the hot spring inn.

Since then, the day had broken, and a few hours had passed.

She would need to have an answer by tonight.

“It’s your job to do the thinking—you were thinking all night. Haven’t you come to a conclusion?”

“Sure. You might even say that I made my decision when he asked me. I slept so well last night I didn’t even dream.”

Shichika kicked Togame’s feet out from under her.

Defenseless, she fell flat out all over again.

“What the hell?!”

“Huh, that’s weird...” Shichika was puzzled, his own behavior a mystery to him. “I dunno, for some reason I felt like teasing you a bit.”

“You’re beating the crap out of me! Why did you just kick me?”

“You whack⁹ me all the time. Now we’re even.”

“Ugh, what’s made you so cheeky?” Togame stood herself up yet again, her

look suggesting that it wasn't her second tumble so much as Shichika's behavior that disturbed her.

"Well? What did you decide?"

"Needless to say, his offer is a life raft¹⁰—even if this place weren't a harbor, we'd still have to get onboard. But there's no point to negotiations if you hop aboard right away, so I was stalling him."

"I see..."

"What's wrong? You seem distraught. Don't tell me that you're too scared of Azekura—if you are, why use me as a punching bag to practice your secret move?"

"Hold on. I'm not worried about the duel... Whether or not it happens at the Basket, I know I have to fight him somewhere, sometime. Still, I mean," Shichika stammered, "what if I lose?"

"If you lose? Azekura spelled that out for me, but fixating on losing won't do you any good."

"That's neither here nor there, I want to hear your take on this. You think Kanara Azekura—would do a good job as your bodyguard?"

"Huh?" Unsure what would happen if she asked Shichika for help again, Togame tied her obi by herself for the first time in months. "Hmm, I wonder," she said, directing her gaze pensively at the ceiling. "I guess—something about his offer did ring false to me. It's hard to tell how much to believe. The likelihood of some ulterior motive is all too real."

"Right." Shichika nodded. "I mean, imagine the captain of a band of pirates working under you, a person from the bakufu—"

“No, that would be fine. You’re not exactly in the most desirable position yourself. The Kyotoryu is the school of a banished criminal—lest you forget, one purpose of our journey is to clear your father’s name.”

“Ah, yeah, that slipped my mind...”

Shichika was playing with her, acting like he’d actually forgotten.

Something was wrong, and getting worse, but Togame continued. “This pirate network of his is a force to be reckoned with. Aside from Zokuto the Armor here in Dakuon, and the Shikizaki blades already in our hands, there’s only one sword left whose whereabouts and owner we have verified—to round up all of the Twelve Possessed, information will be crucial. The might of the bakufu is one thing, but the underground intelligence of this pirate network—”

Shichika’s hand yanked Togame’s hair of white.

Seizing on her scalp like talons, without restraint.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“I dunno...my hands just got away from me.”

“You can’t just touch a woman’s hair!”

“Seems a bit too late for that...”

For a time, after all, she’d been wrapping his body in her hair every night. Their Sword Hunt had gone on long enough for Shichika to recognize her, which made their nocturnal ritual unnecessary; yet only the night before, she’d asked him to stomp her white hair with his foot.

“Look, if that’s the way you feel—me and Azekura may as well not fight at all.”

“Huh?”

“I could be wrong, but aren’t you trying to minimize the amount of fighting on

the Sword Hunt? Diplomacy first, right? In that case, why not just skip the duel and have him help you on the Sword Hunt? And why limit yourself to a single bodyguard? You could have the Armored Pirates working on your side, behind the scenes, while you and I hunt down the other swords.”

“I doubt Azekura would comply. He wants to fight the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—but if the rest of what he said is true, his motives are more personal. Shichika, I think he sees you as a nuisance.”

“Me?”

“Sounds like he wants to have his woman to himself...”

Love at first sight.

Be my girl.

That was how he put it.

He could care less about the Shikizaki blades—and had no intention of deferring to the bakufu. For his woman, however, he would put all his energy into the Sword Hunt—

“Well, I guess...you could do worse,” Shichika muttered like he had a bit jammed in his molars. Evidently, his remark went against his true emotions.

“No, I’m not so sure. Who knows what prompted his proposal. I can’t take him at his word—after all, he is a pirate.”

“But Togame,” said Shichika. “I thought you said you could trust a man who works for love?”

What Azekura promised her the night before—echoed what Shichika had said to her on Haphazard Island.

Which is why he couldn’t ignore this.

Shichika was having second thoughts—about a duel.

“True, I can’t trust someone who works for money—I can’t trust someone who works for honor. But I can trust someone who works for love... That’s what I said.”

Then Togame paused, as if something had occurred to her.

Perhaps the keen¹¹ schemer realized why Shichika had been bullying her in a peculiar manner. Realized rather belatedly for a keen woman. For his part, Shichika must have been allowing impulse to guide his actions without realizing what he was doing...

“You know, big as you are...you sure are acting like a baby.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean.”

“Alright. How would it make you feel? To have that man take over as my bodyguard?”

“What would happen to me?”

“Depends on the duel. If he kills you, then it’s over, but if you managed to survive—I guess you would go home to your sister, on Haphazard Island.”

“That’s...”

Shichika thought over what she said.

Indisposed to thinking as he was.

“That’s...not okay with me.”

“No?”

“But if you think—that it would help you in your Sword Hunt—I’m sure you can find someone to replace me.”

“Cheerio!”

Togame saw her chance and stomped his toes.

With all her weight, as payback for the teasing.

And lately she was being very generous¹² with her Cheerios.

“My toes! That really hurt.”

“Shichika.” Disregarding his complaint (of course), Togame asked him, “Am I to understand you’re that attached to me?”

“Me? Attached? I’m not so sure I’d...”

Togame stepped right up to Shichika, as if she were ready to grab him by the collar and shake some sense into him.

“Listen, Shichika. I’m—”

Before she could go on.

“Madam,” a voice came through the shoji.

The same voice as the night before—the inn worker. Shichika was so absorbed in his argument with Togame he had failed to hear any footsteps coming down the hallway.

It was like a splash of water in the face, but perhaps the timing was a blessing given that Togame was getting fairly heated.

What did they want?

Azekura’s henchman was not supposed to come by for an answer until evening, and it was barely noon.

“What is it?” Togame asked through the shuttered door.

“I have a letter here addressed to you.”

“A letter? From whom?”

The inn worker’s vague wording suggested that it wasn’t from Kanara Azekura, and the voice verified this through the door. “I’m not too sure—but he had long hair, and he was wearing an extremely...unconventional ninja outfit.”



They had been summoned to a meadow at the edge of town.

A place blanketed in short grass, where any rendezvous would stand out from afar, and seemingly unfit for a secret meeting¹³ with a ninja, but on the other hand, anyone attempting to eavesdrop on their conversation would immediately be seen—the landscape offered nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide.

In the middle of this meadow.

He sat atop a sizable boulder.

A man with youthful features.

Slim build, black hair spilling over his shoulders. Expressionless, but with a glimmer in his eyes.

Sleeveless ninja garb.

Chains wrapped around his body. A strange man.

“ ... ”

Munching on a skewer of chadango.¹⁴

Intently, as if to ignore the arrival of Togame and Shichika—he seemed to be delighting in his snack, though his face barely betrayed any emotion. When he had eaten the dango down to the skewer, he snapped it in half and tossed it down his gullet, swallowing it too.

Then finally—he looked their way and stood up from the boulder.

“I am Hohoh¹⁵ Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan,” he declared, bowing his head deeply. “As one of the Twelve Bosses, I have had the pleasure of serving you on multiple occasions, but this would be our first time meeting in person, Miss Togame—excuse me, Madame Schemer.”

“Ah.”

Togame nodded cautiously.

Not exactly nervous—so much as holding back her anger. This sentiment was understandable, since the Maniwa had double-crossed Togame—and yet her voice had taken on a weight requiring further explanation.

Shichika picked up on this immediately.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t faced a living member of the Maniwa in some time—the last had been Komori Maniwa, from whom they prized Zetto the Leveler. When they encountered Shirasagi Maniwa in Inaba Desert, he was already decaying; and when Kuizame Maniwa descended upon Shichika at Triad Shrine, Togame was occupied with other matters.

Hohoh Maniwa.

“This may be our first meeting, but I have heard so much about you,” she said. “Distinguished among the Twelve Bosses as Captain of the Bird

Unit—effectively the head of the entire ninja clan. Isn't that right, Hohoh...Sir Hohoh."

"I wouldn't call myself the head—you overestimate me. The Bosses have a reputation for being unique individuals, which sounds admirable, but the reality is that most of us are weirdos who have a hard time functioning in society. Since I have a modicum of common sense, I volunteered as interim director—drawing the short straw,¹⁶ on account of being the most sociable."

"..."

Togame kept quiet.

Meanwhile, Shichika did not know a great deal about the Maniwa's relationship with Togame, much less the extent of their past involvement¹⁷ with the bakufu, so this was no time for him to be butting into the conversation. He simply kept his eyes peeled, making sure the coast was clear, lest a dozen ninjas spring upon them out of nowhere.

The head of the Maniwa Clan had something to discuss with Togame.

The letter he left at the inn was to the point.





“Hey Togame—what’s Bird Unit?”

“Oh...didn’t we go over this? The Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan are split into four groups of three: Bird Unit Maniwa, Beast Unit Maniwa, Fish Unit Maniwa, and Bug Unit Maniwa—Komori Maniwa was from the Beast Unit, Kuizame Maniwa was from the Fish Unit...and Shirasagi Maniwa, and I guess this guy, both belong to the Bird Unit.”

“Ah, same unit as Shirasagi.”

“Yes, but don’t get careless, Shichika. This man is a cut above the other eleven Bosses.”

Hohoh Maniwa. The Phoenix.

A bird, to be sure, but out of all the Bosses, he was the only who used an imaginary creature for a namesake—the *Divine*¹⁸ *Phoenix*.

“No need to be alarmed, at least not here and now. I meant what I wrote. I merely came here to have a word with you, Madame Schemer.”

“And why should I believe that?” spat Togame. “Do you realize what I’ve been through thanks to all of you? Do you realize how unwillingly I acquiesce?”

“You’re here, aren’t you? The fact you came all the way out here suggests, to me, a willingness to talk things over.”

“If I had my way, I would steer clear of any dealings with the Maniwa—but once I knew that you were here, I had to take you down.¹⁹ You could only be a nuisance to our Sword Hunt. Pests need to be exterminated before things get out of control.”

“An arm...”

Hohoh raised his left arm—toward Togame.

“If you will hear me out, I’ll chop off my left arm.”

“...?!”

“Just listen, and one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa...effectively the head of the entire clan, as you so nicely put it, will cut off his own arm. No pressure to go along with anything, you understand—just hear me out, and come to your own conclusion, Madame Schemer. If you’ll only listen, then my arm is yours. How about it?”

“H-How about it?”

Togame’s perturbation was not lost on Shichika. What on earth did Hohoh have in mind? It wasn’t like the man was carrying a sword—how was he going to cut off his own arm?

Before Togame had a chance to answer.

Hohoh raised his right hand high, poised rigid as a blade—and let it drop just shy of his shoulder.²⁰

The blade of his hand.

Just like in the Kyotoryu—except.

When his hand met the base of his arm, it chopped straight through!

“Wha...”

“E-Eek—”

While the Kyotoryu enabled Shichika to wield his hands and feet, nay, his whole body like a katana, his so-called blades were not actually sharp, and lacked a cutting edge. At the end of the day, he was playacting as a sword. Hohoh Maniwa, on the other hand, had severed his own limb, true to his word.

While Togame and Shichika exchanged looks of trepidation—

Hohoh calmly wrapped his chains around the gushing wound, as a tourniquet. Nothing changed in his expression. It appeared he did not feel a thing, at least from the way he held himself.

His left arm, on the ground...

Twitched²¹ and convulsed, as if possessed of a life of its own, but eventually it fell still. Only moments prior, this had been an integral part of his body, but Hohoh showed no interest in the dismembered limb.

He merely shot a cool glance at Togame.

“There—if you wish, I will chop off my right arm as well. How about it?”

“No...”

Togame gulped—but managed a response to Hohoh, in a voice void of emotion.

“Enough of that, I’ll listen—assuming you won’t mind if Shichika stays put?”

“By all means. He can listen too. So you’re Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu? The one who sent Komori and Shirasagi...along with Kuizame to the next world?”

“Precisely,” confirmed Togame.

“Actually...”

Shichika wanted to say it wasn’t him who took down Shirasagi and Kuizame, but when Togame flashed that evil eye of hers, he shut his mouth. Apparently, she was ready to take credit for their deaths as if her bodyguard (and not Ginkaku Uneri and Meisai Tsuruga, respectively) had killed them.

It could benefit her “negotiations” with Hohoh.

“I’ve lost contact with Chocho Maniwa, Mitsubachi Maniwa, and Kamakiri

Maniwa, all three members of the Bug Unit—do I have you, Madame Schemer, to thank for that?”

“What? No, I know not of what you speak.”

Naturally, Togame was familiar with the Bug Unit.

From the way Hohoh phrased his question, she surmised that Chocho, Mitsubachi, and Kamakiri were gone—in other words, they had lost their lives while hunting down the swords. Taking credit for their passing too was untenable, however, and she had opted for an honest answer.

The fact that the Bug Unit had been thrashed by Shichika’s older sister, Nanami, head of the Yasuri family, was not yet known to any present party.

“Is that so.”

Hohoh Maniwa did not force the issue.

“In any case,” he resumed after a pause, “I’ll have you know that the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan have been reduced by half in only half a year. At this point, I must say, we would have done well to swear off the Kiki Shikizaki blades. Our decision to betray you, Madame Schemer, was an error.”

“...”

“At least, it may have been.”

Hohoh observed Togame as he spoke.

His eye contact was fierce—and cold, as if having chopped off his own left arm were no longer on his mind.

“Then again, with the awful state of Maniwa Village, we hardly had a choice—though we’ll not speak of that. We cannot turn back the hands of time, and our only hope is for the six of us to muddle through somehow.”

“Can you? Or more importantly—think we’ll let you?”

“Let us, no. With the owners—for Zokuto the Armor, that means Kanara Azekura—you two, and us ninjas locked in a three-way struggle, we cannot see this Sword Hunt through. Which brings us to the crux of our discussion, Madame Schemer. Care to forge a temporary alliance with the Maniwa?”

“A-Alliance?”

Shichika was startled, but that didn’t even begin to describe how Togame felt. After cutting ties so absolutely—why bother with a mock alliance now?

“Sirrah—did you come all the way to Kyushu just to make a fool of me?”

“On the contrary. I’m merely saying we would do well to avoid unnecessary conflict—if the word ‘alliance’ leaves a bad taste in your mouth, why not call it an armistice?²² That way you can focus on your Sword Hunt, Madame Schemer, while the Maniwa focuses on our own. That way we can avoid these useless duels and stop attacking one another. Know what I mean?”

“If only things could be resolved so easily—but we are chasing after the same thing. If we meet near one of the Mutant Blades, we have no choice but to clash swords.”

“While it may seem that we are after the same thing, Madame Schemer, that is not exactly true. Your mission is to hunt down all of the Twelve Possessed, whereas we would be overjoyed to capture two or even three. Of course, the more the better—but we see no need to hunt down every single one.”

“...Point being?”

“Point being—perhaps there is a way to do this without fighting. For example, we could resume our hunt from the opposite end of the map.”

“Are you proposing—we avoid direct contact entirely?”

“Exactly.”

“ ... ”

Togame glared at Hohoh—thinking it over.

Not to sound like Azekura had the night before, but this was not such a bad deal. With three of the Bosses dead—six, if she believed Hohoh—the Maniwa had every reason to beg, and it would be a huge help if she could carry out her Sword Hunt without the ninjas interfering.

That said, the deal was not without its disadvantages.

No disruption from the Maniwa also meant letting them carry on with their own Sword Hunt. This was tantamount to giving them a head start on several of the swords—

However.

Come to think of it, there was only one sword left, apart from Zokuto the Armor, whose whereabouts she had ascertained but had yet to capture—Togame had no idea where, in all Japan, the other six might be. Not like she had nowhere to start, but the reconnaissance would put a burden on their progress.

In which case, she could delegate *the unknowns* to the Maniwa, while she and Shichika pursued the one sword they had a lead on. An alliance was off the table, but an armistice was not to be dismissed. Permitting the Maniwa to do their own thing for a little while longer was a fitting enough strategy.

If the Maniwa failed to track down the lost swords, no harm done. Nay, for just as Togame, in her Sword Hunt, had profited thus far from the errors of the Old Shogun, she stood to benefit further from the ninjas’ missteps, for an even

smoother process down the line.

And if the Maniwa succeeded in obtaining any of the Twelve Possessed, all the better. She need only seize them from the Maniwa, and the success was hers! The challenge was to catch the ninjas before they vanished, and establishing the whereabouts of the swords would be most convenient!

“ ...”

Shichika was turned off by the air of villainy wafting from Togame, but Hohoh Maniwa, who had come with the offer, had not arrived at this discussion without indulging his imagination to a similar degree. Indeed, the Maniwa, in their own right, could see this armistice as most convenient. They could let Togame the Schemer and her bodyguard Shichika gather all the swords—then cash them out²³ when they were through, making things far more efficient and practical.

Overjoyed to capture two or even three—a nice idea, but not to be trusted. No more than cajolery, aimed at making her cooperate.

If greed were gold.

The Maniwa would be richer than all the bandits and the pirates.

These were the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki—surely they would not give up the fight until every last one of the Twelve Possessed was theirs.

Since their motives were identical, a final showdown²⁴ was inevitable.

It may be time to check up on the Shikizaki blades we’ve already delivered to Owari...

With Togame thus preoccupied.

Hohoh shared another thought.

“Of course,” he said, “if our negotiations come to nothing—I will have no choice but to fight you, after all...as much as I do not wish to.”

“...”

“To think how close you are to capturing Zokuto the Armor. You wouldn’t want to spoil that over a fuss with me.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No threat—*not yet.*”

Hohoh spoke in measured tones, without a hint of violence.

I mistrust negotiations that proceed at a clip, whether I like the sound of it or not—a policy is one thing, but Togame was not in a position to simply disregard his offer.

Refuse, and she was asking Hohoh for the battle to begin.

Yet his strength in battle was an unknown quantity²⁵—if severing his own arm with the blade of his hand were any indication, the best thing going for him was his creepiness. Cutting off your own arm is no way to get the upper hand.²⁶

Then, for now...

“Soto the Twin,” Togame said.

“Huh?”

“The last of the swords whose whereabouts I know—I suppose that means that I’ll be heading for it next. If you go after any of the other swords, we won’t cross paths.”²⁷

“Do you agree to an alliance?”

“Not an alliance. An armistice.”

“Music to my ears.”²⁸ Whether or not he meant these words sincerely, it was hard to say, but Hohoh took a stance of gratitude. “Thank you kindly. And where might Soto the Twin be?”

“I see no need to tell you that—I know you’re asking out of more than curiosity. How can I be sure that you won’t beat us there, while we are occupied with capturing the Armor?”

“Right, I never should have asked. Your consent²⁹ is the best that we could expect. And now that you’ve consented, I’ll convene a meeting with the other Bosses. As you may know, to boost morale, the Bosses are competing to see who can snatch up the most swords—it was actually my idea, but I think it’s time we called it off. Now that our numbers have been halved, the competition has lost its sporting premise...but Madame Schemer. To thank you for agreeing to my selfish proposition, how about some intelligence.”

“Intelligence?”

“Trust us at your own risk—but in Mt. Shirei in Mutsu, and Tendo in Dewa, and in Edo, you can find three more of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki. What you will find, and where to find it, is more than I can say, but even if one of them happens to be Soto the Twin, that’s two more swords for you.”

“In Mutsu, and Dewa. And in Edo—Edo?”

For a thank you, this was a boon of information. So far as Togame was concerned, Soto the Twin was across the waters, up in Ezo. In other words—she had just gotten a lead on not just two, but three more of the swords—

That is, if Hohoh was telling the truth.

But why lie now?

“Those three are the only swords that I can speak to. If I join forces with the

other Bosses, and we concentrate on tracking down the other three, I see no reason why we wouldn't stay out of each other's way. Do you?"

"No—but..."

"But what? Still distraught? You want some more intelligence?"

Not distraught, so much as distrustful.³⁰

Nevertheless, Hohoh was fixing to toss her some more information. His generosity was beginning to feel creepy—surely he was up to something.

And yet the next words he uttered blew her distrust out of the water.

"Back in Owari—Princess Negative has started making moves."

"...What!"

As evinced by her reaction—Togame was aghast. Shichika didn't understand Hohoh's remark, but the noise she made was enough to spook him.

Princess Negative?

Never heard of her.

Not once had Togame mentioned such a person.

But now Togame lost her mind on Hohoh.

"Fool—I've *shut her mouth* once and for all."

"Sure. We're the ones who got the job done, so no need to remind me—but it seems that she has capitalized on your absence from Owari."

"Tsk!" Togame clicked her tongue loudly, making a sour face. "Each time I think I've finished her, she just pops up again. I thought I'd seen the last of her, that nasty woman. Ugh!"

"Look who's talking, she might say..." Hohoh Maniwa cracked a smirk.

Togame's hissy fit was too funny.

"Well? What sort of moves is she making?"

"Who knows? It's hardly our concern—though neither of us wants another party vying for the Shikizaki blades. We have no interest in meddling with infighting in the bakufu, but if we need to, we're prepared to jump into the fray."

"...In that case, I would be much obliged," Togame said to Hohoh, once she had settled down. "For the time being, *I'll need to trust you*—but enemies we remain. If you break our pact and interrupt my Sword Hunt, on purpose or by accident, then I promise you, *my sword* will cut you down."

"Understood—*so long*, then."

Hohoh seemed to have had enough parleying for one day. Without hearing a reply to his farewell, tarrying not one bit, he turned to make his leave, ignoring the arm sitting on the ground.

Shichika had a question.

Who on earth was Princess Negative?

From what they had been saying, it sounded like she was also from the bakufu?

But Hohoh stopped midstride and interrupted Shichika just as he was about to open his mouth.

"Oh, one more thing, Madame Schemer—it seems you have a habit of saying 'Cheerio!' before you punch your employee. When I heard that from Komori, I knew something was wrong, but when I made it here to Satsuma, I finally figured it out. You mixed it up with *Chesuto*."



“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Togame—Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate—ran off.

All out.

Full speed.

Exhausting every effort, she ran.

But remember, this was an exhaustive effort from Togame, who took pride in her eschewal of armaments. The strength of her arms and legs was average, or subpar at the very best—yet she summoned all her strength, and purged her stores of every kind of energy, dashing across the meadow.

Leaving Hohoh Maniwa far behind.

She may have missed the rest of his invaluable explanation.

“‘Cheerio’ is something said in foreign lands, instead of ‘Sayonara.’”

Her splendid finery in total disarray.

Her signature white hair in disarray.

She ran like mad, full tilt³¹—nowhere special, anywhere but here.

“Waaaaaaaaahhh! No no no no no no no! You got me wrong, you got me

all wrong!”

Crying out to no one in particular.

A wailing of the soul, to shake the heart of all who listened.

“Wait, wait, wait a sec! I can explain!”

Wait? But it was Togame who had bolted. That line belonged to her retainer Shichika, who was chasing after her. While he had confidence in his abilities, Togame gave him a run for his money. Her speed made her seem possessed.³²

Plus, he’d had a late start, reluctant to just leave the Maniwa standing there. Hohoh had said, “Go ahead and chase her,” which Shichika had done, though not because the ninja told him to. At this rate, she was bound to throw herself into the sea.

Of course it had to be the Maniwa who set her straight. That surely made the gaffe feel even worse.

“No, no, wait! Please, hear me out! You’ve got it wrong—all wrong!”

More wailings of the soul.

When she closed her eyes, her thoughts returned to her exchange with Shichika three months ago, while walking in Inaba Desert. He’d asked her what she meant by “Cheerio.”

Here is what she had said:

It’s my catchphrase.

Unsurprisingly, Shichika asked what she meant by this. Didn’t sound like Japanese.

As if an island monkey can judge.

I'll have you know that it's a grand old saying.

Favored by the warriors of Satsuma in Kyushu as a battle cry—you might call it their kiai.

And to sum things up:

It suits my personality exactly.

“Personality? Give me a break!” Togame took a jab at herself, three months too late.

Which is when Shichika, whose innate strength could not be bested by this pageant of despair, finally caught up with Togame. He was close enough to reach out and touch her, but refrained, not knowing how she might react to contact.

“Hey, Togame—”

“Don’t talk to me!” she screeched. “I’m not stupid! Okay? I’m not stupid! I’m not embarrassed. I’m not embarrassing! Nor am I confused. H-H-He’s the one who’s confused!”

She was blaming everything on Hohoh. And yet she kept on running—suggesting that the revelation had struck a nerve.

Her scarlet face nearly burst into flame.

Her entire body slimed with sweat.

Rather than catch Togame from behind, Shichika decided he would pass her, then circle back and stop her in her tracks.

“Gadzooks!”

Since Togame was running with her eyes practically closed, she ran straight into his open arms—but her force, which he had woefully underestimated,

knocked him flat.

Togame sat astride him as if were a horse.

“Hmph, ugh, ughhh...”

Shockingly—

Togame the Schemer was bawling her eyes out.

Spilling unapologetic, shameless tears, she clenched her teeth.

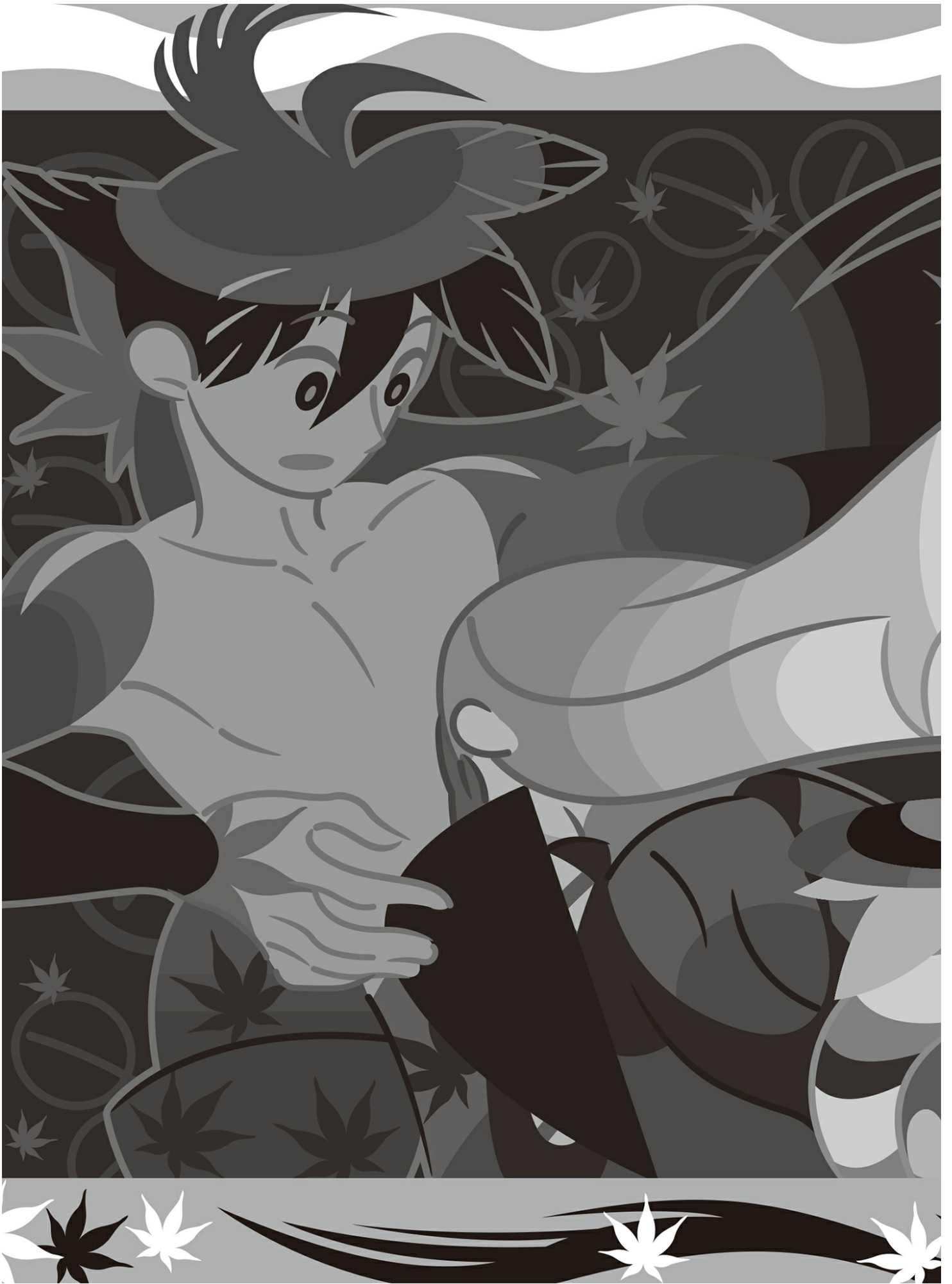
“Ugh, argh...ughhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Come on, seriously?”

“Shut up! I hate you!”

She sounded like a little kid.

She made fists and pummeled Shichika, taking all her anger out on him—but he sat back and let her punch away. For one thing, the punches were not going to hurt him, but more than that, he was astonished at Togame, whose face was psychopathic.³³





“Shi-Shichika!”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Shichika, Shichika, Shichika, Shichika!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!”

“You know better, you know I’m not confused! I’m not confused!”

“Uh, umm—”

“I just, just, I mean, it was intentional!”

“I-Intentional?”

She scared the crap out of Shichika.

When a bawling woman rides you like a horse and starts beating the crap out of you, what man can keep his cool?

“You heard me, intentional! Have you forgotten whom you’re dealing with? I’m Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate! When it comes to smarts, I have it all—ingenuity, intrigue, schemes and stratagems! Of course I knew that ‘Cheerio’ was a foreign word!”

“Oh, okay. So, uh, Togame, why did you intentionally—”

“Because!” Togame blurted out, before Shichika could finish. Trouble was, it seemed that she had yet to arrive at a good reason. The notion that she had done it all on purpose was her only hope, but try as she might, she could not come up with any rationale for replacing *Chesuto* with *Cheerio*.

“Whatever! It never happened. Forget it, forget it!”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“Please, Shichika—you should be ashamed!”

Now she was making other people feel bad.

What could be worse.

“Uh, why should I be?”

“Think for a second. How many times thus far on our journey have I yelled ‘Cheerio!’ and punched you? Dozens! Hundreds! Too many to count!”

“Yeah, um—sure.”

“And every time people saw it, they were going, ‘Hey, why’s the whitehaired lady yelling *Sayonara!* as she bops him on the head?’ Actually, it’s not so bad for earlier in our journey. The problem is after we arrived in Satsuma! What do you think Azekura thought last night when I yelled ‘Cheerio!’ and slugged you one?”

“Well...you’ve been extra generous with the Cheerios since we got here...”

Once they arrived in Satsuma, which she believed to be the birthplace of “Cheerio,” its veritable hometown, it appears she got a little carried away. Spinning her wheels.

How many times had Azekura witnessed her mistake...

“I’m sure he thought I was an idiot! Look at this idiot, he thought, and let me be! What could be more devastating?”

“I mean, I get what you’re saying...but why should I be embarrassed too?”

“I may be the one who said it, but you’re the one who didn’t even know that the real battle cry is ‘Chesuto,’ not ‘Cheerio,’ you island monkey!”

“Uh, actually, I did.”

“Cheeri-ohhh!”

Her fist hit him square in the face. An absolute beauty.



Once they had left the meadow.

Sure enough—Hohoh Maniwa was in the same place we last saw him.

Only now, he was surrounded—by three brawny men.

Clearly not his friends.

Hohoh Maniwa wore no sword, but the three men were variously armed—and wearing looks of unabashed aggression.

Hohoh gave each man a quick once-over.

As it turns out, these men were Armored Pirates—recall the letter addressed to Togame at the inn. It specified this meadow as the meeting place. Hohoh had penned it in his own hand and left it with the inn worker. *In a town ruled by the Armored Pirates.*

The inn worker had no choice but to inspect a letter sent to someone whom Dread Captain Azekura had called upon without accompaniment. And once it was inspected—the Armored Pirates would need to be apprised of what it said.

Therefore.

The talk between the Schemer and the Maniwa Boss had been monitored after all.

Hohoh had picked the meadow to avoid this; even if they saw them from afar,

they would never catch the content of their speech. And so it was after Shichika and Togame had departed that a group of pirates snooping from a distant vantage point—came forth.

“Would you mind telling us exactly what you all discussed?” asked one of the men.

“The lure worked, and yet,” Hohoh spoke, but only to himself—“who might these strange little fishies be?”

It was as though he had meant to drive Togame and Shichika away with his cautionary words regarding “Chesuto” once they had accepted his offer.

To fight these three men—on his own.

“Suppose I needed a new arm. Anyone have one to spare? I’m not picky.”

“Huh? What the hell—”

“You’re lucky, fellas. Few get to die from my ninpo.”

With that—

Hohoh Maniwa stiffened his right hand.

“Decapitation Cycle.”³⁴

¹ 恭順 KYŌJUN submit

² 惚れた女 HORETA ON’NA a woman one has fallen for ³ 連中 RENCHŪ bunch (of people) ⁴ 寸止め SUN DOME 寸 SUN a pre-modern unit, approx. 3 cm (1.2”) 止める TOMERU to stop ⁵ 鏡面 KYŌMEN face of a mirror ⁶ 伝導 DENDŌ conduct, convey homophonous with 伝道 DENDŌ missionary activity ⁷ いろは IROHA Japanese equivalent of “the ABCs”

⁸ とんとん拍子 TONTON BYŌSHI brisk rhythm ⁹ どつく DOTSUKU pummel
¹⁰ 渡りに船 WATARI NI FUNE a boat at a river crossing (see also Part One,
p. 291) ¹¹ 聡明 SŌMEI wise

¹² 大盤振舞 ŌBAN BURUMAI “treating to/with a large platter” act of largesse ¹³ 密談 MITSUDAN confidential dialogue ¹⁴ 茶だんご CHA DANGO tea dumplings (usually matcha flavor) ¹⁵ 鳳凰 HŌ’Ō “The Phoenix” mythical birdlike creature ¹⁶ 貧乏くじ BINBŌ KUJI “the poor lot” 貧乏 BINBŌ poverty くじ KUJI lot/lottery ¹⁷ 因縁 IN’NEN history, karma 因 IN cause(s) 縁 EN tie(s) ¹⁸ 神の KAMI NO godly, of the gods ¹⁹ 駆逐 KUCHIKU expel, drive out/off *e.g.* 駆逐艦 KUCHIKU KAN (navy) destroyer ²⁰ 肩口 KATAGUCHI “shoulder mouth” top of the arm ²¹ びくびく BIKU BIKU onomatopoeia for quivering ²² 一時休戦 ICHII KYŪSEN “temporary ceasefire”

²³ かつぱげ[る] KAPPAGE[RU] collect (money, stakes) in great quantity ²⁴ 対決 TAIKETSU “decisive confrontation”

²⁵ 未知数 MICHISŪ “yet unknown number”

²⁶ 有利な条件 YŪRI NA JŌKEN favorable condition, advantage ²⁷ 鉢合わせ HACHI AWASE “bump bowls” metaphor for two heads knocking together ²⁸ 助かる TASUKARU “That helps” a way of saying “thank you”

²⁹ 承諾 SHŌDAKU acceptance ³⁰ 不満 不審 FUMAN FUSHIN unsatisfied suspicious ³¹ 遮二無二 SHANIMUNI desperately ³² 神がかった KAMIGAKATTE ITA “was divinely inspired”

³³ 鬼気迫る KIKI SEMARU “borderline demonic” echoes the “Kiki” in Kiki Shikizaki ³⁴ 断罪円 DANZAI EN “Arc of Condemnation” 断罪 DANZAI

convict; behead 円 EN circle echoes author's debut novel クビギリサイクル
KUBIKIRISAIKURU, itself a playful title: 首切りサイクル KUBIKIRI SAIKURU
beheading cycle OR くびぎりサイクル KUBIKI RISAIAKURU yoke recycle

CHAPTER
FOUR
RYURYOKU
KAKO



The next day—Kanara Azekura, both Captain of the Armored Pirates and owner of Zokuto the Armor, and Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, were scheduled to battle at the Basket, the arena of the town surrounding Dakuon Harbor. A clash of swords, if you will, only Azekura wore his sword, which took the bizarre form of western plate mail, and Shichika, though swordsman he may be, wore no sword whatsoever. An odd confrontation, to be sure, but a clash of swords nevertheless. The battle would decide the fate of Zokuto the Armor, emblematic of not only Kanara Azekura, but of the self-styled Armored Pirates—as well as what would become of the enigmatic whitehaired woman whom Azekura had reportedly fallen for at first sight. The people of town ditched work to crowd around the fence edging the Basket and watch their leader fight, drawn by an enthusiasm far greater than the time that hotshot swordsman slashed through five opponents to the final round.

Azekura had beautifully demonstrated his talents as an entrepreneur.

Except—there had been a tiny change of plans.

As a formality, the challenger, Shichika Yasuri, would need to prove his mettle by besting a choice three of the Armored Pirates on the Basket's roster—at least, that had been the plan until that morning, when those three men were found dead in a meadow on the edge of town.

Dead—all three of them.

Mercilessly shredded, chopped to pieces, by who knows what kind of a blade.

Strangely, the left arm of one of the men was missing. Despite a thorough sweep of the area, it had not been discovered. Inexplicably, another arm, belonging to a different person, not one of the three men, was found at a short distance away, discarded—

“Left arm...”

After hearing this news from the inn worker, Shichika knew instinctively, and Togame felt justified in her suspicion. “The ninja,” she muttered through her teeth.

Hohoh Maniwa—the ninja.

Making a living out of dirty deeds.

What was stopping them from *playing dirty*¹ in their negotiations?

“Are you saying...this guy swapped one arm for another?”

“I wish I could tell you it couldn’t be done, but we’re dealing with a veteran ninja. Hohoh Maniwa, Captain of the Bird Unit—we need to think outside the box.”

“Yeah, but if he can attach someone else’s arm, why not reattach his own? Why would he just leave his own arm?”

“Who knows,” Togame snapped. What else was there to say?

Whatever was happening, ninpo was certainly to blame. In which case, thinking rationally was not going to get her anywhere. No choice but to postpone.

What harried² Togame most of all: Hohoh Maniwa’s interference actually

shunted Shichika to the final round. The fight at the Basket, decided upon the moment she accepted Azekura's offer the night prior, had been advertised all over town. It was much too late to cancel or reschedule the event—scrapping the preliminary matches was no justification for canceling the headliner.

And there was no one else for Shichika to fight.

There were other Armored Pirates, but evidently the only ones suited to the Basket were the five who had been beaten by the hotshot swordsman, and the three who had been slaughtered in the meadow, eight in total.

They were an elite few.

Three had gone to listen to Togame confer with whomever dropped by with that letter, but the trio had been killed—it was natural to suspect Togame, but Azekura seemed to have decided not to go there. Perhaps he didn't care to admit that he'd been watching them—she had no way to confirm this, but it seemed likely she was right.

To Azekura, the three preliminary fights were about saving face. But if they had been called off due to an *unfortunate accident*—no loss for him.

From his perspective.

Taking down Shichika Yasuri, companion of Togame—was all that really mattered.

Which brings us to the Basket.

The main act started without prelude or fanfare.

“ ... ”

Ready for battle—stripped to the waist, arm guards off and barefooted, no sandals, clad only in his hakama, Shichika tested his footing. The sand piled into

the Basket—was not so different from the sandy beaches on Haphazard Island where he had spent so many hours practicing.

He looked at the opponent standing before him.

The foe he was about to battle—Kanara Azekura.

A warrior with no chink in his Armor.

That full metal jacket,³ unparalleled in armor class.

Above all, he was giant.

A bigger enemy—

“Let’s get one thing straight, Kyotoryu.”

Azekura’s voice boomed from inside the Armor, as he turned his gaze on Shichika.

“I’m the type of guy who can’t back off once he gets going—you may wind up dead...or somehow make it out alive, but I promise you’ll be mortally wounded. There’s no way around it,⁴ even if it hurts the woman I adore.”

Once we’ve been traveling a while, said Azekura, she’ll come around.

“As eager as I am to fight the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, if you give up,⁵ Kyotoryu, before things go too far...you could live to see another day. You’re so young—why let your talents go to waste?”

“...”

Shichika remembered.

Two days prior, embroiled with the hotshot swordsman, Azekura had taunted the challenger with all kinds of provocative language—and now he was doing the same to Shichika.

Azekura seemed to understand that this fight would not go easily—regardless of his unrelenting confidence in Zokuto the Armor.

Dead...or mortally wounded.

While Azekura's provocations did not disturb Shichika, they served to jog his memory.

He looked away—beyond the fence edging the Basket, to the prime seats,⁶ where a certain Schemer was waiting for the battle to begin—Togame.

That white hair.

Put her in a crowd, and boy did she stand out. It was easy to forget (though Shichika had never been hung up on the color of her hair) after spending so much time alone with her. She was like a swan among a plain flock of birds.

How could she not catch Azekura's attention?

Togame—

"Shichika, about this fight," she had cautioned him beforehand. "Try to win without killing Azekura or beating him up so bad he won't recover."

"Um..." Shichika had felt stupefied. "What are you talking about? Are you saying to go easy on him? This is serious business."

"I'm not asking you to throw the match. But think a second—Kanara Azekura is the one who guaranteed no one would harm us. If you kill Azekura, the guarantee could expire with him. That includes them handing over Zokuto the Armor.

"Everything is lined up—Shichika. This is the greatest fight this town has ever seen, and everyone is watching. If you should win, Azekura must honor his promise, come what may—as the Kaoyaku of Dakuon, his reputation⁷ is at stake.

But that only matters if Azekura is alive.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

He got what she was saying, without getting it entirely—but Togame was the strategist. His job was to do what he was told.

In this case: go easy on Azekura.

To be sure, Togame wanted Shichika to take her admonition at face value, but there was another important reason—yet it wouldn’t do to divulge it to him.

Avoiding killing.

A worthy experiment, deemed Togame.

What better place for it than the Basket, though she sure had a lot of nerve to be gambling when *her own future* was at stake—

Shichika saw things differently.

He couldn’t help but wonder.

This was serious business, but she was telling him to take it easy—was she crazy? Maybe up against a lesser foe, but on his first time fighting someone bigger than him?

Is Togame—okay with me losing?

While she probably wasn’t hoping he would, perhaps, just like Azekura had asserted two nights earlier, she was thinking—*no loss either way*.

Indeed, if Azekura proved to be stronger, and thus more fit to serve Togame as her bodyguard, what reason did she have to keep Shichika around?

Nobody wants a sword that can’t perform.

Swords are nothing more than tools.

Tools operate without sentiment or feeling.

Fetishizing⁸ tools is facile—thus Kazune Yasuri, founder of the Kyotoryu, resorted to extremes and forsook the sword entirely.

Presented with a sharper sword, what fool declines to take it?

“Hey, no wandering eyes,” Azekura intoned maliciously. “That’s *my woman*—you’re looking at.”

“ ... ”

“There, I’ve turned your head—gah ha ha. Well, seems like you’re dead set on not surrendering. Fair enough, but as we’ve lost our opening act, think you could put on a good show? Treat Dakuon to those skills that took down Hakuhei Sabi—”

“Don’t worry, I will, but you might miss it. *If you’re torn to smithereens.*”

Shichika used his catchphrase.

And assumed a position.

Not Form Four: the Asagao, but Form Seven: the Kakitsubata.

The one he had deployed on Ginkaku Uneri, Lord of Gekoku Castle—the form epitomizing the footwork of the Kyotoryu, where Shichika could change his speed at will.

But Azekura assumed his own position.

He sank into his knees, and lowered his hips—a stance of vigilance.⁹

Prepared to counter Shichika, whatever move he made.

“May the best sword win...” cried out the referee.

The crowd roared—and most, nay all the voices cheered for Kanara Azekura.

True, under these circumstances, killing Azekura would have consequences, especially with Togame, delicate as shoji paper, defenseless to the crowd.

Decent footing, but a nightmare of a venue.

Yet such things were immaterial.

Only one thing matters—I am the katana.

“—Fight!”

On the first punch!

There’s no way I can match him with brute force. If the battle gets drawn out, I have no clue how to handle someone big as him. My only option is to nail him right away!

Hence the Kakitsubata.

Full speed from the starting line.

Shichika closed the distance in an instant.

In the eyes of an amateur, he may as well have teleported—not even Azekura could fathom the advance.

Prepared to counter any move.

But this move was too fast to counter.

To convert mass into momentum, Azekura required a running start—otherwise, Zokuto the Armor was a *drag*¹⁰ and nothing more.

When Azekura realized what had happened, Shichika was already inside his reach.

At which point the Kyotoryu changed his stance.

Feet parallel and sideways, torso twisted back as far as it would go—yes, this

was the time for Form Four, the Asagao! The only of the Seven Forms in which he made a fist...

“I’ll treat you to my skills,” Shichika said, “but I can’t promise a good show—you’re going down on the count of one.”

Twisting so far he faced away, Shichika unleashed a twirling¹¹ fist on Azekura.

“Fatal Orchid Four—Ryuryoku Kako!”

Not giving his opponent a chance to block.

But even blocked, Ryuryoku Kako could not be stymied or deterred!

Theoretically, the move could blast someone on the other side of the planet!

His fist—landed a direct hit on the breastplate of Zokuto the Armor. Shichika’s torso rotated from the impact, but his fist stuck to its target, as if glued there.

The shock would penetrate the Armor, and tear into Azekura’s chest!

Theoretically.

This secret of the Kyotoryu corrupted all defenses, allowing Shichika to wound any target, no matter what stood in his way—in this case, he had aimed for one of Azekura’s lungs. An attack on his respiratory system might overpower Azekura without injuring him fatally, or that was the plan—however!

“Seriously?” an annoyed voice came from up above.

Over Shichika’s head—this was the first time he’d been addressed by somebody so tall.

Bwum, Azekura swung his arm. At a low angle, as if to scoop Shichika off his feet.

“Nkk!”

After the Asagao and Ryuryoku Kako, Shichika was hardly poised for action, but he managed to dodge the blow with his native reflexes. Well, it may have grazed his hair a tiny bit, but he cartwheeled across the sand—to a good distance from Azekura.

At least, it seemed like a good distance, until Azekura hurled himself across it.

“Boulder—”¹²

Barreling his armored body forth.

The power behind that charging armor, outfitted head to toe with blades, had been proven in his previous battle at the Basket—Shichika did another cartwheel and dodged the tackle.

Converting mass into momentum came at a cost; barreling forth, Azekura was unable to change direction, and fell over where Shichika had been standing. Throwing your body flat onto the ground usually proved fatal, but suited up in Zokuto the Armor, Azekura was the exception to the rule.

“Gah ha ha.”

Taking his time—free and easy, Azekura stood. His swagger seemed to say: *Go ahead, just try and hit me.*

Shichika—was unable to act. As much as he wanted to strike, it was out of the question. All he could do was dutifully¹³ assume Form One, the Suzuran, knowing all too well his intercepting stance was meaningless against Azekura’s body slams.

“What—how’d you get away? I could have sworn I nailed you.”

“Hm? What was that supposed to be—armor-piercing? Well, well, I didn’t realize the Kyotoryu had moves like that,” Azekura teased. “But you’ve

underestimated Zokuto the Armor, a sword unparalleled in armor class, forged by Kiki Shikizaki around the principle of defense—sorry, pal, but there’s no piercing this armor.”



Reminiscence—Kanara Azekura edition.

He had told Togame that he was a Kyushu boy, born and raised in Satsuma, but this was a boldfaced lie. At this point in history, Ryukyukoku,¹⁴ where he was born and raised, fell outside of Japan and was a foreign land.

Ryukyukoku—an independent nation that maintained trade routes throughout Southeast Asia and advanced its society on those profits.

Azekura was born in a Ryukyuan fishing village, but at that time, he had yet to acquire his surname. As a child, his whole name was “Kanara.”¹⁵

Son of a fisherman, like every other boy born in the fishing village—in fact, he was pretty much as normal as it gets, aside from being slightly shorter than the other kids, which chafed young Azekura. If anything stood out with him, it was his bearing toward his little sister, Kokoro,¹⁶ five years younger, toward whom he was a tad overprotective.

He was sure he would grow up to be a fisherman, just like his father.

Take some nice girl from the village for his bride, and have some kids.

The opposite would happen to his sister, who would become part of some other family—but no way was she leaving the village.

That was how Kanara viewed the world.

Things would go on happening as they would—he thought their way of life would last forever, into eternity. Life would stay its course, with no surprises, eventless but peaceful.

Yet in hindsight, this was an inarguably childish and naive fantasy.

It happened when he was thirteen.

Entering puberty, and dissatisfied with how slowly he was growing, one fateful day Kanara and his sister Kokoro stowed away aboard their father's massive fishing boat. According to a stubborn¹⁷ village precept, boys were not allowed on boats until they turned twenty, and girls were not allowed at all—but rules were made to be broken, and by no means was this the first time that particular one had been ignored by Kanara or Kokoro.

But it was their first time breaking it together.

Their first and last time.

When the vessel slipped over the horizon, it was raided by pirates.

Armored Pirates.

Owners of Zokuto the Armor—pirates, hailing from Japan, who had evaded conquest by the Old Shogun some hundred-odd years ago, and whose legend had made it to the shores of Ryukyu. Onetime marauders of the Inland Sea, they had shifted operations down to Satsuma, the closest portion of Japan to Ryukyukoku.

Massive as their father's vessel was, it was still only a fishing boat, ill equipped

for putting up a fight. In no time, they were trampled underfoot.

Kanara had not stowed away with anything in mind. This was nothing so laudable as a precocious curiosity about the family trade.

He just wanted to break the rules.

To do what he was taught not to do—and to bask in the danger and the wrongdoing.

The same must have been true for little Kokoro.

But for their mischief, they were punished with an iron fist¹⁸—the Armored Pirates plundered the fishing vessel, and the crew lost not only their food and water, and their load, but their very lives. No one was spared—except Kanara.

Not because he had been lucky.

One of the Armored Pirates spared him, on a whim—after they had slaughtered every member of the crew, one of the pirates found him hiding in the shadows—not trying to defend his father or his sister, just cowering and hiding.

The pirate almost killed him.

But before he swung his sword, he thought of something.

“That’s right, we’ve been looking for a cabin boy...”

A whim.

This was not some bigshot, but merely one of many Armored Pirates, at a time when their numbers were vast, who had happened to recall a vacancy—and through this happenstance, Kanara narrowly escaped death.

If only as a cabin boy, his career as a pirate had begun.

The pains of his existence are tough to imagine. He was forced aboard a foreign ship where he could barely speak the language, and tasked with cleaning up after the very men who had killed his father, and his sister, and the sailors of his village.

No time to cry, nor room for hate.

Only pain.

Every single day was hard and painful.

All his expectations had evaporated—that world was gone, without a trace.

And yet.

And yet he was supposed to appreciate his continued survival?

“Shine the Armor.”

At fifteen, two years into his tenure as a cabin boy, Kanara received this order.

They were the Armored Pirates—and their banner,¹⁹ as should go without saying, was Zokuto the Armor, which they were famed for having kept from even the Old Shogun. Trouble was, the Armor was enormous, standing well over seven feet tall—rare was the man big enough to fill it. In fact, it fit none of the Armored Pirates at the time, too big even for the captain, and served mainly as a figurehead, an ornament they kept aboard for its symbolic power.

And now Kanara had been asked to keep it shining.

An important duty if there ever was one, and an honor—he may have been a lowly cabin boy, but in two years on the job, he had won their confidence. Kanara did not feel anything like pride. An order was an order. No need to question the particulars.

Feeling was out of the question.

If he felt nothing, surely he would not feel—pain.

“ ... ”

But when he beheld Zokuto the Armor.

He was transfixed, by its *silver blade*.

The first time in forever he felt something apart from pain.

The Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki that reigned over the Age of Warring States...

The owner does not choose the sword—the sword chooses the owner.

This was not a claim, so much as a philosophy, the first principle of Kiki Shikizaki.

A sword does not choose who to kill.

But a sword will choose its owner.

That instant—Kanara was chosen, by Zokuto the Armor.

In a kind of living proof, once he became caretaker of the Armor, he started growing taller by the day, like a shoot of green bamboo; he had always been embarrassed about being so short, but before three years had passed, he had grown so tall and muscular, he outsized all of the Armored Pirates.

As though his body was growing *to fit the blade*.

The Armored Pirates used Zokuto as their symbol, but in all of history, including the era of the Old Shogun, there were perhaps not even two who could actually don the gleaming panoply.

And so, it was only natural that one night the captain, in his cups, and out of a

desire to *see the armor move*, half-jokingly told the boy to model it for them.

“Hey, Kanara, let’s see you try this on.”

In over five years as their cabin boy, he had won their confidence.

Even their kindness.²⁰

What could go wrong with having the kid wear a suit of armor? Yet they could not have been more careless.

After seeing the Armor as an ornament for all these years, they had totally forgotten—that despite taking such a shape, Zokuto was a katana.

Kanara, for his part, had not forgotten.

He would never forget.

These men—his sworn enemies, had killed his father and his little sister!

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Screaming—and clad in the Armor, he hurled his body across the room and back.

In a quarter of an hour, the Armored Pirates were annihilated.

Just as they had slaughtered his entire boat five years before, he thoroughly destroyed them, to the man. You see, unlike the slaughter five years prior—Kanara spared not a single life.

Kanara Azekura. The Pirate.

Incredibly, his first plunder was one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

A sword does not choose who to kill.

But a sword will choose its owner—and after so many years without one, Zokuto the Armor had finally found him.

Of course, even with the Armored Pirates eradicated, Kanara could not go home again. No amount of vengeance would bring his murdered brethren back to life, and by then, he had lived too long among the pirates to return to his native village. There was no way he could go and show his face there.

Kanara had no choice but to go through life a pirate. He would organize another band of Armored Pirates and become their self-appointed captain.

This was when he took the surname Azekura, and pledged never to be seen outside of Zokuto the Armor, so long as he lived.

The Armored Pirates were reborn.

But it would be some time before the Basket, the rudimentary arena and gambling facility, was established in the town built up around Dakuon Harbor, for years the stronghold of the Armored Pirates.



“Running away seems to be your specialty,” Azekura, coming to a stop, told Shichika.

Clearly an insult, but Shichika had no reply, since he was only trying to dodge the various charges the man attempted with Zokuto the Armor.

Unbreakable.

Boulder.

Round Boulder.²¹

Whirligig.²²

Lullaby.²³

Frankly, they were all the same to Shichika, just ways of throwing the Armor's size and heft behind a body slam, but he was certain each move packed enough of a punch to knock him flat.

Togame had ordered Shichika to take it easy, but it would appear that Azekura had no intention whatsoever of taking pity on the Kyotoryu.

Nuisance.

That was how Togame put it—she said that Azekura saw him as a nuisance. When a pirate wants something, he takes it. Far from seeing killing Shichika as out of bounds, Azekura likely saw it as the only way to eliminate an unwanted rival.

But Shichika kept dodging all his moves—

Though this is not to say he had not tried to get in a couple of hits. By now, he had attempted the transition from Form Four, the Asagao, into Ryuryoku Kako a few times, taking the plunge whenever he saw an opening.

Yet every move was ineffective.

Or rendered ineffective.

No piercing—Zokuto the Armor.

It would seem that Azekura had been right. What was the deal? Shichika could not understand what stopped Ryuryoku Kako from working. But even if he understood the reason, he had no hope of arriving at a workaround in the confines of the Basket.

A sword forged by Kiki Shikizaki around the principle of defense—in which case, Zokuto might have some *built-in protection against armor-piercing blows*. In fact, it would only be natural.

Ginkaku Uneri's sword, Zanto the Razor, able to cut through anything in a single swing, might slice through Zokuto—Shichika had entertained that notion, but now, he could only conclude that the Armor must have a way of blocking the Razor, too.

An iron wall—unparalleled in armor class!

“Nkk...”

“Go ahead and roll around, but it won't save you, Kyotoryu. Could you be any more of a sore loser? Quit making such a fool of yourself. It makes me sick to think that you're my *predecessor*.²⁴ And to think you call yourself the Strongest in Japan—man up now, just stay put and let Zokuto the Armor do the deed.”

“Man up...”

What—was that supposed to mean?

The words were meaningless to Shichika.

He was a katana incarnate, with no agenda—how could a sword man up?

No emotion or sentiment.

None of that was necessary.

But perhaps Azekura had a point.

If the Armor could not be pierced, then Shichika was fresh out of options. Neither Shichika Hachiretsu, that ultimate secret of the Kyotoryu, combining all seven of his secret moves, including Ryuryoku Kako, nor any other of the various methods of his school would work on Zokuto the Armor. And even if

one did, it would need to be an armor-piercing move to do any damage. There was no chink in the Armor—and apart from Ryuryoku Kako, he had no way of injuring Kanara Azekura without damaging the Armor. Since the secret technique had proven ineffective—

He was stuck.

As if his hands and feet were tied.²⁵

Keep dodging Azekura's body slams, and eventually Shichika would exhaust himself—until finally he failed to get away and met his unfortunate end. That much was clear.

It would happen sooner or later. Just a matter of time.

In which case...

Was surrendering an option, after all?

His job was to win every fight.

But in this case—*losing was forgivable*.

If the Kyotoryu lost, Togame, his employer, would continue with her Sword Hunt—though the journey would end here for Shichika. Kanara Azekura would step in to replace him. If the pirate captain was indeed the better of the swords—it was probably for the best.

Rather than screw up Zokuto the Armor in the process...

He would *man up—man up and let it happen—*

“Idiot!!”

Beyond the fence edging the Basket.

Someone was yelling at him.

The voice was straight behind Shichika—when he spun around, Togame the Schemer, clinging so hard to the wooden lattice that her nails were digging in, leveled a glare more severe than any she’d given him before.

“T-Togame—”

“You think you can give up just like that? Who gave you permission to lose! I told you to win. Were you even listening, dunderhead?!”

Without killing Azekura or beating him up so bad he won’t recover... But before that—

Try to win.

She may have told him to take it easy, but she certainly hadn’t told him he could lose.

Losing—was not an option.

“Listen, Shichika! Alright?” shrieked Togame.

Addressing not only Shichika, but the whole world, in a resounding voice that could be heard by every person in the crowd gathered at the Basket.

“I would never give myself up²⁶ to a man who wouldn’t reveal his true face to the woman he loves! Who wants to spend all day traveling with a guy who can’t join her for a long soak in the hot spring! Guys like that—cannot be trusted!”

“Togame...”

“So what if not one of your moves works! Who cares if you can’t use the Kyotoryu! You may not be wearing armor, but you have a body you’ve been whipping into shape for twenty years!”

If you’ve really fallen for me—

Wham—

Togame beat her fist against the fence.

“Give it everything you’ve got and fight for me!”

This—amounted to a death wish.²⁷

Almost everybody in the Basket was a fan²⁸ of Kanara Azeura, the folks around Togame being no exception. Making such a direct rebuke of Azeura in their midst was not the cleverest thing she could have done.

No.

Her schemes always put her life and soul at stake.

Her schemes taxed her brain and veins alike.²⁹

And now, her scheme—warmed Shichika’s heart.

“Got it. Absolutely,” he said, assuming a stance.

Kyotoryu Form One, the Suzuran.

There was no use trying to intercept a body slam, but something had changed—this time Shichika had something in mind. You could see it in his eyes.

“Whoa, whoa. Almost lost track of my simple nature, what had gotten into me? Lately I’ve been thinking way too much. Not thinking at all is no good, but overthinking things—”

“...”

Azeura was silent.

“Mister Jilted,³⁰ come on,” Shichika beckoned. “I was a little shy at first, but now I’m ready.”

“Don’t get too excited.”

With that provocation, Shichika was trying to outdo his adversary at his own game—Azekura was not amused. His face was hidden by the Armor, but you can be sure that his gaze was trained on Shichika, and at Togame behind him. Being snubbed like this, before the masses, was the worst possible affront to his public image—

“I am a pirate, my enemy’s intentions do not concern me,” he went on nevertheless. “If there’s something that I want, I’ll swat whatever pests are in my way, and make it mine.”

“If you want it, go ahead and try. Still...” Shichika’s voice was calm. “Isn’t your sword, Zokuto the Armor, for *protecting* things?”

“...”

“Strength comes—from having something to protect.”

“You defy Zokuto the Armor, one of the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki. And now for a Zokuto the Armor exclusive...”

Kanara Azekura leaned forward.

“Galleon Gull!”³¹

Scattering the sand packed into the Basket—he charged full speed ahead toward Shichika. The move looked no different from the others; only this time, the spirit driving it was palpable.

A giant mass.

And that giant mass—was heading straight for Shichika.

Behind him stood Togame, and Azekura was charging with abandon, as if to throw Shichika into the fence and crush her too.

No—if Shichika dodged this body slam like he had been doing so far, Azekura

might plow straight through the fence and send Togame flying like the fragile shoji paper that she was.

In fact—that, precisely, could be his aim.

“Phew...”

If so.

Or even if not, Shichika was done evading Azekura’s assaults.

Through sheer force.

There, the old Shichika would never have thought to dodge an enemy—if someone came right at him, he would stand right there and stop the bastard!

So what if the guy was so much bigger?

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Zokuto the Armor was sharp around the edges.

Shichika would need to rely on his strong arms and firmly planted legs—using his entire body would be fatal—and not let the myriad blades touch him.

To stop Kanara Azekura, the giant.

To stop Zokuto the Armor, and all its weight.

When Togame, blinded by humiliation, bulldozed into Shichika at the meadow, he was swept off his feet, but not this time.

“Nkk!”

“Wha...”

Gripping the pauldron and cuirass³² of the Armor with his open hands, with toes dug deep into the sand of the Basket, Shichika brought the ballistic Azekura to a halt.

Stopping the sword midflight—but this show of force was no move he could name!

“Size gives you the upper hand, but being big is only helpful to a point!”

Dodging Azekura’s body slams over and over may have helped him out—the pirate captain may have been a giant, but even giants know exhaustion. But regardless: Shichika had stopped the Armor and its “exclusive” move with his bare hands and a move that barely qualified as such. Game over.

The Kyotoryu summoned all his energies, flexed his arms—and picked up giant Azekura.

Formidable biceps, a death grip—a show of muscle!

Shichika lifted the giant form toward the sky, high over his head!

The spectators had fallen silent.

Surely this was the first time in the history of the Basket that anyone had evaded charging Azekura, much less hoisted his great body like a puncheon, surely the first time that the audience had fallen silent. They held their breath,³³ eyes fixed upon the scene in the arena.

An outlier, Togame beamed among them, nodding happily.

“That’s the stuff.”

She was talking to herself, sounding like she already knew the outcome of the fight.

“You’ve put too much stock in the Kyotoryu, which makes sense, since it’s all you knew for twenty years—but you ought to broaden your horizons. Even without your crafty moves, *your tempered body is plenty strong!*”

“Gah...arggggggggggh!”

Shichika howled like a beast, drowning out Togame's mutterings. Howling, and maintaining a firm grip on Azekura, he leaned back—winding up.

He wound up to throw the giant Azekura to the ground.

No need for an armor-piercing move.

No need to try and drown or fry him.

Zokuto the Armor may have been unparalleled in armor class—but whoever was inside of it was only human. Such was its weakness; it was simply a hard shell, and in a crash landing, hard surfaces are not your friend.

Unbreakable, perhaps—but unshakeable? No.

Toss a shell onto the ground, and its contents would be scrambled.

Mass becomes momentum—and the impact passes through.

The full metal jacket, the wall of iron—was now a lethal weapon, and it was turned on its owner.

“Ugh, you bastard...Kyotoryu—what the hell is this? I thought you were a swordsman!”





Azekura must have known what was about to happen, but hoisted up into the air, he could offer little resistance. Out of options, he cursed out Shichika in every way imaginable.

It blocked armor-piercing blows—and blocked out water and extreme heat.

It could even block Zanto the Razor.

Unparalleled in armor class, Zokuto the Armor was devised to block a wide range of attacks, but *being picked up by another person* was not one of them!

Which left Azekura—with no recourse but to curse and curse some more.

“How are you a swordsman, or a sword?! This strongman show of strength—what kind of sword behaves this way?”

“...I owe you my deepest thanks, Kanara Azekura.”

While the battle was not over yet, a look of ease had crept across Shichika’s face.

“You’ve helped me realize something. I may be the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, and sure, I’m a katana—but at the same time, *I’m a human being.*”

“...nkk!”

“But Azekura, there’s one more thing I’d like to say.”

Summoning his full force, Shichika—dropped down Kanara Azekura’s giant form.

“Keep your hands off my woman.”

The Armor landed with a great metallic clang—and while the Mutant Blade, this masterwork of Kiki Shikizaki, crashed into the ground without suffering a single scratch, the same could not be said about the man inside.

Kanara Azekura was down for the count.

The referee was speechless, unable to believe what he had seen with his own eyes. Since he could not carry out his duty to the Basket, Togame made the call instead.

“Match.”

¹ だまし DAMASHI cheating

² 業腹 GŌHARA “active belly” aggravate ³ 全身鎧 ZENSHIN YOROI
“whole body armor”

⁴ 詮無き SEN’NAKI futile

⁵ 降参 KŌSAN surrender; cry uncle

⁶ 砂かぶり SUNA KABURI “covered in sand” the sought-after seats edging
a sumo ring ⁷ 体裁 TEISAI public image

⁸ 愛着 AICHAKU “loving attachment”

⁹ 様子見 YŌSUMI seeing how things will go ¹⁰ おもり OMORI (dead)
weight; sinker (in fishing) ¹¹ 螺旋 RASEN spiral

¹² 後如 GOSHIKU not a word, plays on ゴシック GOSHIKKU Gothic (a
common font) ¹³ 申し訳程度 MŌSHIWAKE TEIDO “almost apologetically”

¹⁴ 琉球国 RYŪKYŪ KOKU modern-day Okinawa ¹⁵ かなら KANARA in
hiragana here, rather than the character 必 KANARA “unfailing”

¹⁶ こころ KOKORO in hiragana too, rather than the character 心 KOKORO
heart ¹⁷ 旧態依然 KYŪTAI IZEN archaic and persistent ¹⁸ 鉄槌 TETTSUI

“iron hammer” draconian penalty ¹⁹ 旗印 HATA JIRUSHI “flag mark” emblem ²⁰ 情 JŌ sympathy

²¹ 丸後如 MARU GOSHIKU vs. 丸ゴシック MARU GOSHIKKU Gothic Round (font) ²² 回処帯 KAISHOTAI (not a word) 回る MAWARU to turn 処 SHO place, spot 帯 TAI/OBI band vs. 楷書体 KAISHOTAI block style of writing/printing ²³ 眠調 MINCHŌ (not a word) 眠り NEMURI sleep 調べ SHIRABE tune, melody vs. 明朝 MINCHŌ a very standard typeface, often the default ²⁴ 前任者 ZEN’NIN SHA someone previously entrusted (with a task) ²⁵ 手も足も出ない TE MO ASHI MO DENAI “unable to stick out (use) hands or feet”

²⁶ 身を任せる MI WO MAKASERU “entrust one’s body/person”

²⁷ 自殺行為 JISATSU KŌI “suicidal act”

²⁸ 応援客 Ō’EN KYAKU cheering customers ²⁹ 知恵と[...]血を絞る CHI’E TO [...]CHI WO SHIBORU squeeze (out) both wits and blood ³⁰ ふられ FURARE spurned (by a lover), used here as a noun ³¹ 刀賊鷗 TŌZOKU KAMOME “Sword Bandit Seagull” pun on トウゾクカモメ TŌZOKU KAMOME “thief gull” pomarine jaeger, a skua species ³² 鎧の肩と腹 YOROI NO KATA TO HARA the armor’s shoulder and belly ³³ 固唾を呑む KATAZU WO NOMU “swallow a wad of spit”

EPILOGUE





On this Sword Hunt for the Mutant Blades, never staying too long in one place became a fact of life. By noon the day after the duel at the Basket, Togame and Shichika had boarded a schooner arranged for them by Kanara Azeкура. They practically had the whole ship to themselves. Barring inclement weather, they were scheduled to make to Owari in three days—

That said, Togame had not heard as much from Azeкура. After Shichika beat the champion of the Basket, he did not appear again before her.

The concussion¹ was mild.

Light enough he would recover after merely a night's rest—not to say a visit to the famous hot springs. And yet he would not show his face. Togame took this as a sign that he was fine with never seeing her again.

Zokuto the Armor.

On the evening of the duel, the katana had been brought to her in pieces—carried by two of Azeкура's men, two of the Armored Pirates. Since Togame was heading to Owari Castle, she debated packing it aboard their vessel, but she opted for standard procedure, which meant boxing the sword and shipping it ahead of them.

“Miss Togame.”

The two men who had brought the Armor to the inn were by the gangplank

on the morrow, there to witness Togame and Shichika set sail from Dakuon Harbor.

“Captain told us you remind him of his little sister, the one he lost so many years ago. If she were still alive, you and her would be about the same age.”

When she heard this, Togame nodded, *Huh*. Whatever feeling was behind the nod was inaccessible to Shichika.

As usual, he had to wonder: *What was going to happen to Dakuon Harbor, and the town built up around it, and the Armored Pirates?*

What had happened to Gekoku Castle?

What happened to Triad Shrine in Izumo?

While his duel on Ganryu Island had left nothing unresolved, this last fight had left Dakuon with a real mess to clean up. These people were outlaws, and the Basket was effectively a gambling racket. Unlike Meisai Tsuruga, they would be receiving no aid from the bakufu.

What was going to happen to the Armored Pirates, bereft of their namesake Zokuto the Armor—and Kanara Azekura, who had spent so many years inside of it?

“Whatever will be, will be,” Togame said to Shichika, as she stepped onto the deck—and gazed upon the open sea. “I mean...this time, I don’t think anything will change. Like I said, they’re sure to lose prestige, and lose their grip over the town, but in the same way that you’re plenty strong without the Kyotoryu, Kanara Azekura is plenty strong without Zokuto the Armor. The Armored Pirates have sunk their roots in deep, and they’re not about to shrivel up and die—far from it. Things were getting out of control, but now they’ve settled down, and they can find stability.”

“Huh, is that how it goes?”

“After so long hiding himself away inside the Armor, it’s going to take a lot of courage for him to finally face the world.”

“I wish we could’ve seen him,” Shichika confessed. “If we stuck around town a couple more days, we’d have found him, like it or not. I was so curious. What I’d give to meet a guy who’s over seven feet tall.”

“I’m not so cruel to dump a guy only to get his hopes up. Once you’ve broken a man’s heart, the only decent thing to do is hurry up and walk away.”

“You’re the one who said to go easy on him. I was worried that even if I won, you’d wait until we got the Armor and then ask him to replace me.”

“Is that the sort of devious woman you take me for? You disappoint me. I can trust a man who works for love, but alas, I can’t keep taking them on.”

“No?”

“Azekura saw you as a nuisance, but he was just as easily the same to you. We’re in the middle of the Sword Hunt, and I have no patience for a petty rivalry.² Hey, I meant to ask you...” the Schemer said, turning to face Shichika. “Did you like *fighting people without killing them*?”

“Oh...good question. I still don’t think it made much sense to hold back against Zokuto the Armor... It sort of felt fake,³ like it wasn’t a real battle.”

After a pause, Togame said, “I see.”

She had ordered Shichika to go easy on Azekura to ensure their safety following the battle, but this had been a pretext, her secret way of justifying the experiment.

Shichika Yasuri went for the kill the second he laid eyes on his opponent. She

was testing⁴ him. He was not unable to control himself. And he knew all too well what it meant to cut a person down. To take a human life.

The only thing he lacked was an agenda.

Togame had an interest in ensuring that he learn, as soon as possible, what it was like to fight people without killing them. So far as Shichika was concerned, the results were less than satisfactory⁵—but regardless of the outcome, she was quite lucky to have found a fitting pretext.

“Anyway—there’s more to discuss,” Togame changed the subject, to make sure Shichika did not divine her scheme. “We were unlucky...to run into Hohoh Maniwa.”

“Huh? I thought that turned out pretty good. Thanks to him, I got to take on Azekura without working my way through three of the other pirates—plus, he told us where to find a few more swords. That deal you guys made sounded pretty good to me, even if we don’t know how much we can trust him.”

“Yeah, well, all that aside, Hohoh was the Maniwac I was most hoping to avoid. One thing’s for sure, running into him was no coincidence. I’m certain he came all the way to Satsuma *just* to strike that deal with us. He wasn’t here for Zokuto the Armor... And unlike Shirasagi and Kuizame, he knew exactly where to find us. I guess as long as the Maniwa are off on their own Sword Hunt, we were destined to collide with Hohoh sooner or later... What a killjoy. And another thing.”

Another thing.

Something was rotten at Owari Castle.

That woman was making moves...

If this was true...if this was not another ninja trick, and it may well be, coming

from Hohoh—she was in no position to say things like, *I can finally stop scrambling*, even if they had reclaimed the Leveler and the Whisper.

“Another thing? Like how you realized ‘Cheerio’ was the wrong word?”

“CHEERIO!”

Shichika was only teasing, but Togame barraged him with punches.

She had permanently tagged the error as intentional.

The epitome of stubbornness.

What a pitiful personality.

“About that... How is it that you knew that ‘Chesuto’ was correct?”

“I dunno, just heard it from my dad. You said it with such confidence I started thinking maybe I remembered wrong...”

“I see... Anything else you’re hiding? Stuff I’m getting wrong without you telling me.”

“Umm, couple of things.”

“Oh? Sometimes I could just... Alright, out with it. Everything.”

A dangerous⁶ request to someone genuine as Shichika.

His older sister, Nanami Yasuri, had told him to keep a few things to himself, but he let them slip⁷ right then and there. These weren’t the kind of things you blurted out in response to a prompt like *Alright, out with it*.

Dangerous indeed.

“I killed the Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu—my dad, with my own hands.”

“...Huh?”

“And your dad, Mastermind of the Rebellion, Kaoyaku of Oshu—Takahito Hida, the one my dad killed. I know you’re actually his daughter.”



Jilted by Togame, Azekura tried a little vengeance.

They should have seen it coming, but in the end, the ship arranged by Azekura never made it to Owari. It sailed around the Sea of Japan for a fortnight, bound for the Absolute Tundra of Ezo.

There Shichika Yasuri, whose defensive prowess was not to be outdone by the unparalleled armor class of Zokuto the Armor, would come to face Soto the Twin—and to suffer his first wound ever since they set off on the Sword Hunt.

Zokuto the Armor: Check

End of Book Five

To Be Continued

¹ 脳震盪 NŌSHINTŌ “brain shaken and melted”

² 諍い ISAKAI quarrel

³ 窮屈 KYŪKUTSU cramped

⁴ 試行錯誤 SHIKŌ SAKUGO trial and error

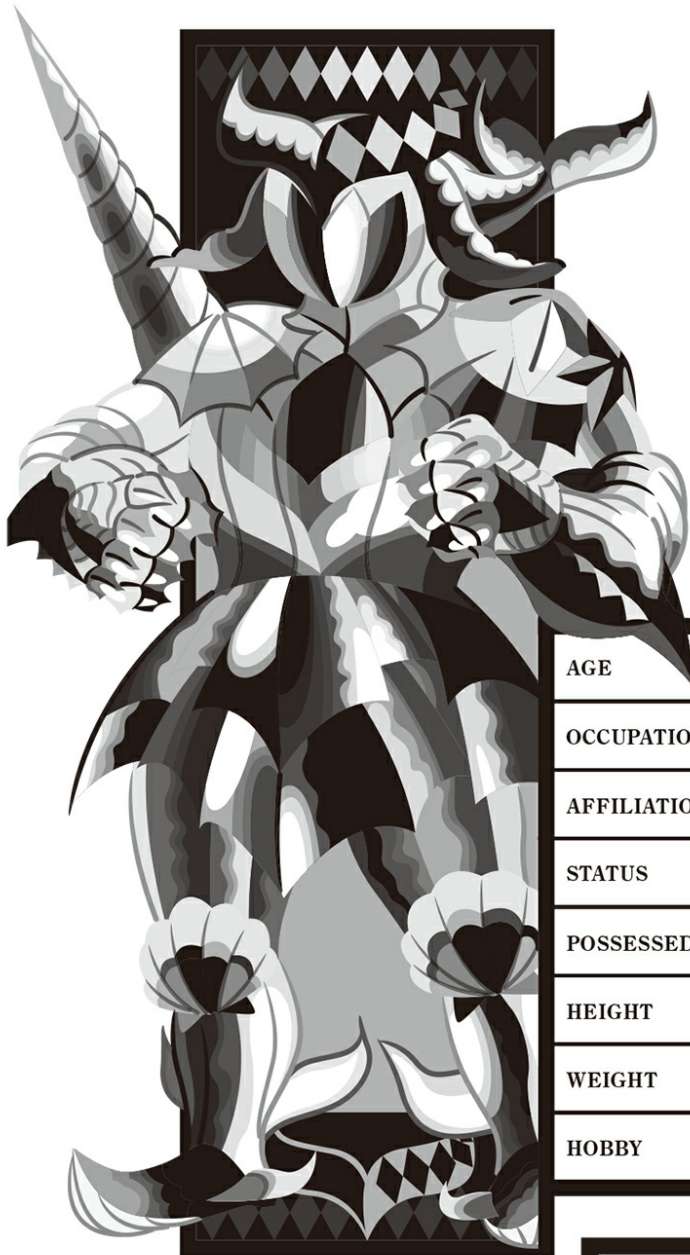
⁵ 芳しい KANBASHII “rosy”; fragrant

⁶ 軽率 KEISOTSU imprudent

⁷ 口止めする 口走る KUCHIDOME SURU, KUCHIBASHIRU “stop someone’s mouth” / “run one’s mouth”

CHARACTER
INDEX 5

KANARA AZEKURA



AGE	Thirty-eight
OCCUPATION	Pirate
AFFILIATION	Armored Pirates
STATUS	Captain
POSSESSED	Zokuto the Armor
HEIGHT	7' 6"
WEIGHT	344 lbs.
HOBBY	Fishing

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

UNBREAKABLE	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST
BOULDER	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST
ROUND BOULDER	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST
WHIRLIGIG	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST
LULLABY	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST
GALLEON GULL	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST

You need to be careful about when to say this, and exercise caution in how you phrase it, but there is such a thing in this world as the “Allure of Evil,” and depending on the time and the place, in certain cases it seems as if it can be more alluring than the “Allure of Justice.” In manga and in novels, even beyond the picaresque, it’s often not the hero but the villain who becomes the favorite, and it’s not rare for it to seem as if the author constructs his or her argument with the help of the villains, not the heroes. What is evil anyway? I would need far more than these two pages to list up every example that comes to mind, and no matter what I say, the logic is apt to be a total mess, completely full of holes, so I’ll save that for another day, but in extremely general terms, for the time being, I might say that evil must involve “somebody else.” You could define evil a number of ways, like “breaking the rules,” or “causing people trouble,” but if you plug in the concept of “allure,” evil starts looking more like “someone who can do the things I can’t do,” or “someone who can say the things I can’t say.” Allure is all about the grass being greener on the lawn next door. Even if it’s something that you have no interest doing, the fact that someone else is doing it, that they have a completely different value system and ethical sense, can be enough to make us “jealous” and start to find that thing attractive. But sadly, the weak have the greatest weakness for allure; and while I won’t sit here and tell you it’s delusional, it’s usually a mistake. Different values simply mean a different way of life, which is nothing to be jealous about. The person who you think is evil probably thinks the same thing about you, or maybe even envies you. And if you take this feeling of envy, the idea of otherness being inherently

alluring, and turn it on its head, it can become a justification for total hatred and utter disregard, so maybe our systems of ethics and morality develop in a place separate from our sociability. But at the end of the day, evil things are bad, and evil deeds are bad. All that matters is avoiding the grave error of declaring you and your people to be on the side of justice.

Which brings us to the end of Book Five of the twelve-volume *Sword Tale*. This time, we were down in Kyushu, Satsuma to be specific—or modern-day Kagoshima. I have a habit of setting my books in Kyushu, frankly because I like the place, and when I first got the idea for this series, I wanted it to contain two separate episodes in Kyushu (one in Satsuma, and one in Nagasaki), but as the story began taking shape, it looked like it wasn't happening, so I packed all of my enthusiasm into this one installment. Now that the story has survived its hasty beginning and made it to the middle stage, I feel like I can see the road ahead. Don't think we'll be launching anybody into outer space just yet...which gives me, as the author, peace of mind. The illustrations *take* has been making of the Maniwa are so incredibly good that all I want to do is write. After the next volume, we'll be halfway through the journey. I hope that you'll enjoy *Book Six: Soto the Twin*! ...With a name like the Twin, wouldn't it be crazy if it was just a normal pair of swords?

Seven books to go.

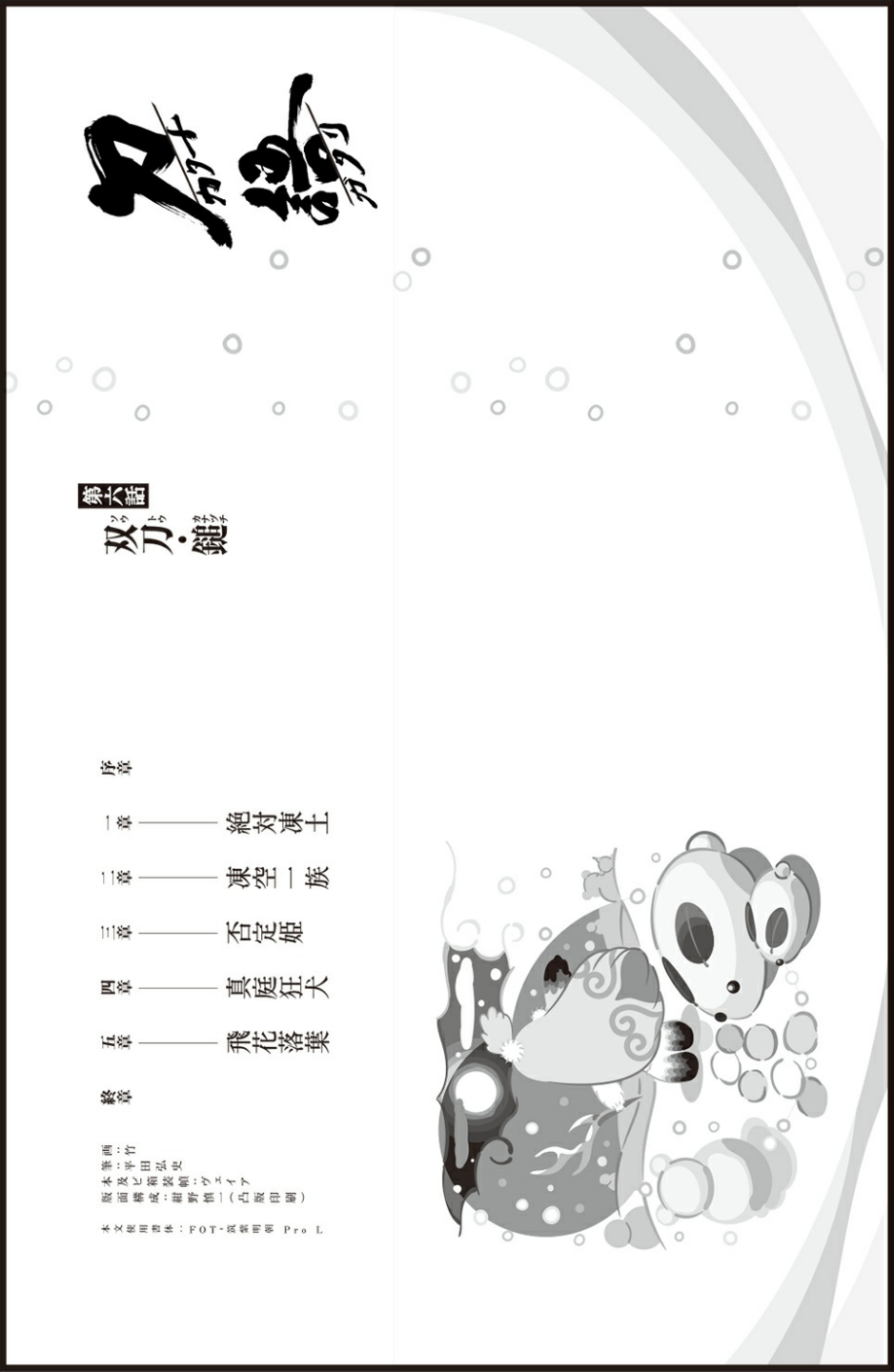
NISIOISIN



BOOK SIX



SOTO
THE TWIN



第六話

双刀・鏈

序章

一章——絶対凍土

二章——凍空一族

三章——否定姫

四章——真庭狂犬

五章——飛花落葉

終章

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The original Book Six Table of contents spread



PROLOGUE



After double-crossing Togame the Schemer, and hence the Owari Bakufu—the Maniwa Clan, that band of expert assassins, absconded from the village that had thus far been their base of operations. The bakufu turned over every stone, but was unable to find them—while they had managed to smoke out that weasel Hakuhei Sabi, the status of the Maniwa remained a mystery.

What follows is a private, off-the-record conversation that took place, deep within the forest, at the center of New Maniwa, which not even the bakufu could locate on a map.

“...That’s about it.”

No lights.

All was darkness in the murky night.

None present felt impeded by the darkness—and why should they? This was a ninja-only gathering, and to ninjas, darkness and gloom are creature comforts.

The Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan.

A muster of the ranks.

However, not all Twelve Bosses could attend—only six were here. At present, these six represented all the living Bosses of the Maniwa. In the past six months, their numbers had been halved.

Cut in half—in just six months.

“All the same...”

From his position, he appeared to be the leader of the six—a man with long hair and cold eyes.

One of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan—“The Divine Phoenix,” Hohoh Maniwa.

According to Togame the Schemer, he was effectively the head of the entire Maniwa Clan—but if you asked him, he had volunteered under duress. Regardless, he had been in Satsuma of late, where he and Togame the Schemer had forged an alliance. We join him after he has told the other five of this development.

“I was stunned to hear that all three members of the Bug Unit had been exterminated—it still needs to be confirmed, but their failure to attend this special assembly says as much... Hear anything on your end, Oshidori?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

It was the voice of a young woman.

Her sleeveless ninja garb and the chains wrapped around her body were no different from the other Bosses, but her voluptuousness no uniform could hide—she had that special something.

Oshidori Maniwa—“The Feathered Reel.”¹

“I haven’t heard a thing.”

And yet the way she held herself said otherwise. She knit her brows, and looked away, and chewed her lower lip, the pretty thing—taking pains to hide her fury and her anguish.

Hohoh noticed something was up.

“About Chocho,” he said. “Weren’t you two pretty close?”

“...”

Her silence counted as a yes.

Hohoh and Oshidori were both members of the Bird Unit. Asking her first about the Bug Unit suggested that he already suspected as much. “In that case, do I sense resistance to this new alliance with Togame the Schemer?”

“On the contrary.” Oshidori looked up, responding instantly. “I speak for both myself and Chocho, lowly ninjas that we are—when I say that we are humbled to be members of the Maniwa. I have no interest in revenge or vindication.”

“Course not.”

This affirmation came from a member of the Beast Unit standing directly next to Oshidori—Kawauso Maniwa, “The Nosey Otter.”² His tone was brusque, but not without a tinge of care for Oshidori.

“If I had my way, I’d give whoever killed that dope Komori the whooping he deserves, but that’s not the way it goes, willpower is what makes us ninjas... Still, why’d Komori have to go and die before we could settle the score? I suppose that he’s been known to pull that sort of stunt before. He said he loved to entertain, but he sure knew how to leave a best friend like yours truly in the lurch. Hey, Hohoh. When you made your deal with the Schemestress,³ the Kyotoryu was there, too, right? What’d you think?”

“Hard to say. It’s not like we had a throw-down. But my guess is...we’re in trouble. Best to steer clear.”

“Harsh words from a ninja of your standing.”

“If what I hear is true, soon after we settled the deal, he defeated Kanara Azekura... I got the sense that he would be a fearsome adversary, but it appears he’s getting stronger by the day. Or should I say, he’s getting sharper.”

“Katana.”

This interruption came from a member of the Fish Unit—“The Immortal Turtle,”⁴ Umigame Maniwa. Low and quiet, even languid, his tone of voice got the attention of all present. All eyes were on cross-legged Umigame, the only ninja seated.

“The Kyotoryu—is a katana. And as a sword cultivated on a desert island by Mutsue Yasuri, the Hero of the Rebellion, his blade must be incalculably sharp.”

“Are we to understand,” inquired Hohoh, not sounding the least bit surprised, “the Kyotoryu was in your purview, Umigame?”

“Actually,” he said, “I think that Chocho knew about him, too.”

When Chocho’s name was spoken again, Oshidori gnawed at her lip even harder. Hard enough to draw blood. But unlike Hohoh and Kawauso, Umigame paid no mind to Oshidori whatsoever.

“If any of us can take him, it’s either me or Hohoh...that is, if this Kyotoryu has been able to unleash his latent power.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

While not actually angered by this implication he would be left off of the starting lineup,⁵ Kawauso snapped at Umigame. As one might expect from interactions between freshwater and saltwater creatures, the Otter and the Turtle did not exactly get along.

“The power of a sword depends on who is wielding it,” replied Umigame.

“They say the Mutant Blades, these masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki we’re trying to collect, can make whoever wields them powerful enough to take over a country...but there’s no substitute for being powerful from the start. They also say a sword chooses its owner, but do you think our little Schemer is the right fit for the Kyotoryu?”

“At one time she had her way with the entire clan. I wouldn’t underestimate her,” cautioned Hohoh. “Which is why, for the time being, we would do well to avoid further conflict with the Kyotoryu, or with the Schemer. Say what you will, Umigame, but up against the Kyotoryu, even I may be in danger. Like I said—best to steer clear. If we fulfill our objective, that’s good enough for us. Let them cash in on the Sword Hunt...and meanwhile, something is rotten at the castle.”

“The castle?” Kawauso was having none of this. “*Not her again*—that woman’s just as crazy as the Schemer. Makes you wonder how many of these firecrackers⁶ the Owari Bakufu has.”

“Pretty sure just two,” Umigame said, dead serious. “If they had another menace the likes of them among their ranks, the bakufu would fall apart, regardless of how many of Shikizaki’s swords they collected.”

“Whatever the case may be,” mediated Oshidori, “am I to understand we’re heading in the opposite direction from the Schemer? Hohoh—how shall we proceed? Perhaps it’s time to call off the competition among Bosses.”

Her question brought them back on track.

“Yeah,” said Hohoh, nodding. “From here on out, we must join forces. The Schemer told me that upon capturing Zokuto the Armor, they would head back to Owari—which is just the sort of lie that she would tell. She and the Kyotoryu left Dakuon Harbor on a sailboat bound for Ezo.”⁷

“E-Ezo?” Silent up until this moment, without a single word or sign of breath—Penguin Maniwa, “Penguin the Breeder,”⁸ was barely audible, as if talking to himself. “Th-Th-They must be after...Soto the Twin.”

“Brilliant, Penguin—you never fail to come back with the best intelligence around. Second to none, not even the late Komori. With him gone, it would be fair to say that the fate of the Sword Hunt is in the hands of you and Kawauso.”

Rather than accept these words of praise from Hohoh, Penguin hung his head, not so much shy as terrified. He was shivering all over.

“Hmm,” said Hohoh, after a moment’s thought. “The Schemer did say that Soto the Twin was the last sword she could locate...and evidently it’s in Ezo. I told her she could find swords in Mt. Shirei, Tendo, and Edo—she must be planning to work her way from north to south. What an insatiable woman. I had to tell her of the stirrings at the castle, but what fun would this be if things just went as planned.”

“Does this mean we should avoid those four swords in our hunt?”

“Correct. That leaves three—if we can obtain but a single sword, we have a chance of winning in the end. Of course, capturing all three would be ideal, which is why I’ve called you here for this special assembly. You haven’t been running around Japan for the past six months for nothing—even if you don’t know where the swords are, I’m sure you all have decent leads.”

“U-Um,” Penguin spoke up again. “Um... Um Um Um Um Um Um Um.”

“What’s wrong, Penguin.”

“It’s about what, what you were saying earlier...about how one sword is in... Mt. Shirei.”

“What about it?”

“The sword you said...would be in Mt. Shirei. I-It’s gone... Not just the sword, but all Mt. Shirei.”

“...?”

Put on the spot by Hohoh, Penguin faltered his way through a painful explanation. His disposition being partially to blame—but from the sound of it, Penguin himself couldn’t believe it.

As highly as Hohoh esteemed the quality of Penguin’s information, this was too much, and the Phoenix could not help but ask: “Do you really mean it?”

“Y-Yes, and before long, the bakufu will hear, hear about it too...”

“I see.” But Hohoh had to ask him—one more time. “Penguin, are you sure this information is correct?”

Penguin answered with a nod and nothing more.

“Understood. A nod from you is all I need. But if we’re dealing with a *monster*, it seems I’ll have to call upon you—Kyoken.”⁹

Hohoh turned to his right, to gaze upon the ninja he expected to see there—Kyoken Maniwa of the Beast Unit.

However.

Nobody was there.

Nothing but deep—the deepest darkness.

“Kyoken?”

He called her name and looked around—to see if she was present. The other Bosses did the same—Oshidori, Kawauso, Umigame, Penguin—but Kyoken Maniwa was nowhere to be found.

“Alright. Kawauso...” Giving up on finding her, Hohoh asked his question to Kawauso, the other living member of the Beast Unit. “When did Kyoken—disappear?”

“Beats me. *In her current state*, when she decides to make a move, not even I could stop her—but I think that she was still here when you were blabbing about Ezo.”

“Drats,” lamented Hohoh. “She must be on the Schemer’s tail.”

Normally imperturbable—Hohoh was showing signs of stress.

“She likes being a ninja a bit too much... Even Kawauso and Oshidori have managed to hold it together, but here we are. If Kyoken is on the move, the alliance didn’t last a month after its conclusion.”

Indeed, not one of them could gainsay him. The Bosses, Hohoh included, knew all too well—Kyoken Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan.

Once *she* was on the move, no one could stop her.



Finally, we’ve seen the whole gang!

Maniwa Beast Unit—Komori, Kawauso, and Kyoken!

Maniwa Bird Unit—Shirasagi, Oshidori, and Hohoh!

Maniwa Fish Unit—Kuizame, Penguin, and Umigame!

Maniwa Bug Unit—Mitsubachi, Chocho, and Kamakiri!

Together, they were the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa!

Not one among their ranks so impudent or soft to say: “Fish Unit? But turtles and penguins aren’t fish. They could at least let Penguin in the Bird Unit...”

You think the Maniwa would want a wiseacre like that?

And without further ado!

Soto the Twin,¹⁰ whose both ends are in sight!

Togetherness, sneakiness, and bloodiness!

Another shocking, rollicking episode.

I’ll let you guess what’s coming in Katanagatari, Book Six ♪

¹ 巻戻しの鴛鴦 MAKIMODOSHI NO OSHIDORI “Mandarin Duck the Rewinder”

² 読み調べの川獺 YOMISHIRABE NO KAWAUSO “The Inquisitive Otter”

³ 奇策士のねえちゃん KISAKUSHI NO NEHCHAN “Sister Schemer”

⁴ 長寿の海亀 CHŌJU NO UMIGAME “Sea Turtle of Longevity”

⁵ 戦力外通告 SENRYOKUGAI TSŪKOKU notified one will not be on the team (in pro sports)

⁶ 爆弾 BAKUDAN bomb; in this context, “that could go off any moment”

⁷ 蝦夷 EZO old name for 北海道 HOKKAIDŌ, the northernmost of the four main islands

⁸ 増殖の人鳥 ZŌSHOKU NO PENGIN “The Multiplying Penguin” 人 HITO
person 鳥 TORI bird

⁹ 狂犬 KYŌKEN “Mad Dog” as with Chocho, the original is glossed けふけ
ん KEFUKEN (but pronounced KYŌKEN), using an old way of transliterating
Japanese

¹⁰ 双刀 鎚 SŌTŌ KANAZUCHI “The Twin Sword: Hammer”

CHAPTER
ONE

THE
ABSOLUTE
TUNDRA





“Yes, you’re heading in the right direction,” a local told them, “but are you sure you want to go to Mt. Odori?¹ Just the two of you? I wouldn’t recommend it... You think they call this part of Ezo the Absolute Tundra² just for fun? That place is certifiably forsaken by the gods. Don’t tell me you were unaware. Take my advice and post up in one of the nearby villages for a while, to give yourself ample time to prepare. Once you’re on the mountain, it’ll be too late to wish you hadn’t come.”

“Ha...”

However harsh, this advice came from a place of deep concern—and yet the whitehaired woman, dressed in at least two dozen layers of flamboyant finery, laughed it off.

“Hey, Shichika. This guy’s oblivious. Clue him in on just how marvelous I am.”

“Sure thing, Togame.”

Beside the whitehaired woman, the young man whom she had called Shichika—tall, muscular, stripped to the waist, wearing nothing but a hakama—nodded his tousled head of hair.

“Alright, so Togame, who I’m totally in love with by the way, is the type of person who can find herself in deep trouble, even on the verge of death, and never regret one of her decisions.”



“Why did we ever come heeere—!”

Blizzarding so violently you could not see a foot ahead of you, the sky rang with this admission of regret from Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu.

Even this bloodcurdling scream was swallowed by the blowing snow. Avalanches awoken by a screaming climber may be common as a plot device, but nothing about this circumstance was common.

Ezo. Mt. Odori.

The terrain itself was not precipitous—less than half as high as Mt. Taizan, which they had climbed together in their third month of the Sword Hunt, on their way to Triad Shrine, the home of Meisai Tsuruga.

But this was the Absolute Tundra of Ezo.

Even near in the sixth moon³ of the year, the average temperature was a frightful twenty-two degrees below freezing.⁴

The snow never relented the entire year, regardless of the season.

It was a known fact that Mt. Odori was a land of blizzards; alongside Mt. Shirei in Mutsu and Lake Fuyo in Edo, it had been designated by the Owari Bakufu as a Level One Disaster Area.⁵ Nobody in their right mind would go near it, nor

would they have any reason to. If you insisted on making the ascent, you would need to spend over a month in rigorous preparation, and craft a plan of action, and assemble a large climbing party—but once the schooner left them harborside, Togame the Schemer hopped on a dogsled in a bee line for the mountain, whereupon she and Shichika, after zero preparation whatsoever, entered Mt. Odori on foot.

Which was understandable.

On her mission to round up the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki, she could not rely on help from strangers, and she had no time to make careful arrangements.

But as a denizen of the grand halls of Owari, Togame underestimated the Absolute Tundra and its status as a Level One Disaster Area. *I'm already overdressed. Being cold is nothing I can't handle*, or so she thought.

Frivolously.

“Brrr! I’m freeeezing! I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die... I’m such an idiot. Why didn’t I listen to that kindly stevedore?!”

“Lighten up, Togame...”

In snow like this, not even Shichika could go shirtless. Togame had bought him a coat at the harbor; by then, it had been already so cold he needed it.

She was riding piggyback.

Since the snow was piled deep enough that even Shichika sank to his knees, it would have been physically impossible for her to make the climb. Unwillingly (?) she had hopped up on his back, a position she’d refused to take on Mt. Taizan (opting instead for a bridal carry, an odd preference). But a Schemer had to eat too,⁶ had to conserve body heat, and she’d resigned herself to this intimate

orientation. As it turned out, Shichika's muscly body was a fine body warmer, and she tossed aside her pride and hugged him hard, holding on for dear life. If she didn't, her petite frame would be lost into the blizzard.

"Ugh, uggggh... I wanna go home, I wanna go home..."

"Too late now. We're halfway up the mountain."

"Aren't you freezing?"

"Should I be? I'm wearing a coat."

"Look, my..."

Togame was about to tell him that even her hair had frozen, but when she noticed that his was in the same shape, she held back. Shichika was apparently dull to the pain. His body made a wall between Togame and the blizzard, making the cold somewhat easier to bear, but only because he was confronting it full blast.

"This snow's crazy though," he said. "Guess the wind must be why it's only piling knee-deep. The wind's even crazier than the snow. It's like climbing through an avalanche. Hard to go in a straight line."

"Shi-Shichika, when I die..." Having presumed she'd freeze to death, Togame pleaded feebly, "Popularize 'Cheerio' as a battle cry, throughout Japan."

"Wh-What are you saying?!" he roared. "Pull yourself together! This is no time to feel sorry for yourself!"

"I can't go on... That's about all that I can take. Please, Shichika. Take care of 'Cheerio' for me."

"Don't be ridiculous! How am I supposed to make everyone use 'Cheerio' the wrong way?"

“If anyone can, it’s you...my chosen sword...”

“No! Togame, I’d be lost without you! There’s no way I could popularize ‘Cheerio’ without you. Togame!”

“Nonsense, in these six months, I’ve taught you everything I know. You no longer need my schemes... Spreading the word about ‘Cheerio’ should be a piece of cake...”

“Get ahold of yourself! Togame, there’s so many things you need to do!”

“Need to do...” Togame let her eyes fall shut and chuckled. “But do I really need to? Heh, I was hung up on that stuff for far too long. *Yikes, I can’t catch on so quick...*”

The Schemer was beginning to sound delirious from the cold.

“They murdered my family, tarnished the family name. I sought revenge and fought alone... But traveling with you I started to wonder, somewhere along the way, if it wasn’t all meaningless.”

“Togame...Togame!”

“I was a fool. True happiness comes not from dwelling on the past, but from moving on, with someone by your side...stepping forth, together. What took me so long?”

“Y-You can’t catch on so quick, Togame...”

“For twenty years, I walked that road alone, but in less than half a year, you’ve showed me...how to live.”

“No, nothing I’ve done so far could have changed your approach to life!” Shichika jerked back his head and whammed it into Togame’s brow. A head-butt. The pain brought her to her senses.

“Funny... I feel like I got ahead of myself there for a minute.”

“Must be your imagination. Anyway, you said you’d fill me in once we were on the mountain.”

“Huh...about what?”

She had forgotten. It would seem Togame the Schemer was quite pervious to the cold.

“About who I’ll be fighting—and Soto the Twin.”

“Ahh, that’s right.” All she needed was a nudge to jog her memory. Togame nodded knowingly. “Yes...we came here seeking Soto the Twin. That is why we sojourned all the way from Satsuma to Ezo.”

“...”

In actuality, she’d had no intention of winding up in Ezo, having planned to set sail out of Satsuma for that stronghold of the bakufu, Owari Castle. She had stepped into a vicious trap⁷ laid for her by Kanara Azekura, Captain of the Armored Pirates and erstwhile owner of Zokuto the Armor, their fifth conquest of the Twelve Possessed, those masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki. Their boat was bound for Ezo, not Owari—but either way, her memory of the past had been redacted.⁸

She had a way of making situations work for her. Since Mt. Odori in Ezo was supposedly where they would find Soto the Twin, they needed to make the trip up here eventually.

“Hey, Shichika, I feel we may have already discussed this, but I’m not sure what kind of sword Soto the Twin will be.”

“Huh? Oh, right. You mentioned that when we were climbing up Mt. Taizan...

but how's that possible? I thought you knew the owner and location for one more sword, and this was it."

"I know its owner and its whereabouts."

"Well?"

"I still don't know what kind of sword it is." Togame's tone was resolute, perhaps in part to take her mind off of the cold. "Since the days of the Old Shogun—nay, since this masterpiece was forged by Kiki Shikizaki, Soto the Twin has stayed in Ezo on Mt. Odori. Not once has it been said to leave."

"Does that mean Kiki Shikizaki came here too?"

"Precisely. The legendary swordsmith trekked into this Level One Disaster Area...and made this Mutant Blade in situ. This sword is no joke. We should expect it to be more powerful than all the others we have seen thus far."

"I bet...it's strong against the cold?"

Kiki Shikizaki had invested each of the Twelve Possessed with special characteristics: Zetto the Leveler boasted hardness, Zanto the Razor sharpness, Sento the Legion strength in numbers, Hakuto the Whisper fragility, and Zokuto the Armor, armor class.

"Strong against the cold? That wouldn't be much of a sword." Normally, Togame would have shouted "Cheerio!" and bopped Shichika upside the head, but right now she couldn't help but think, *Sounds pretty good*. Besides, she was too fatigued to bop.

Pressing her body even harder into Shichika, a sword "strong against the cold" in his own right, she instead rubbed (i.e. nestled) her cheek against his neck to generate more warmth through friction.

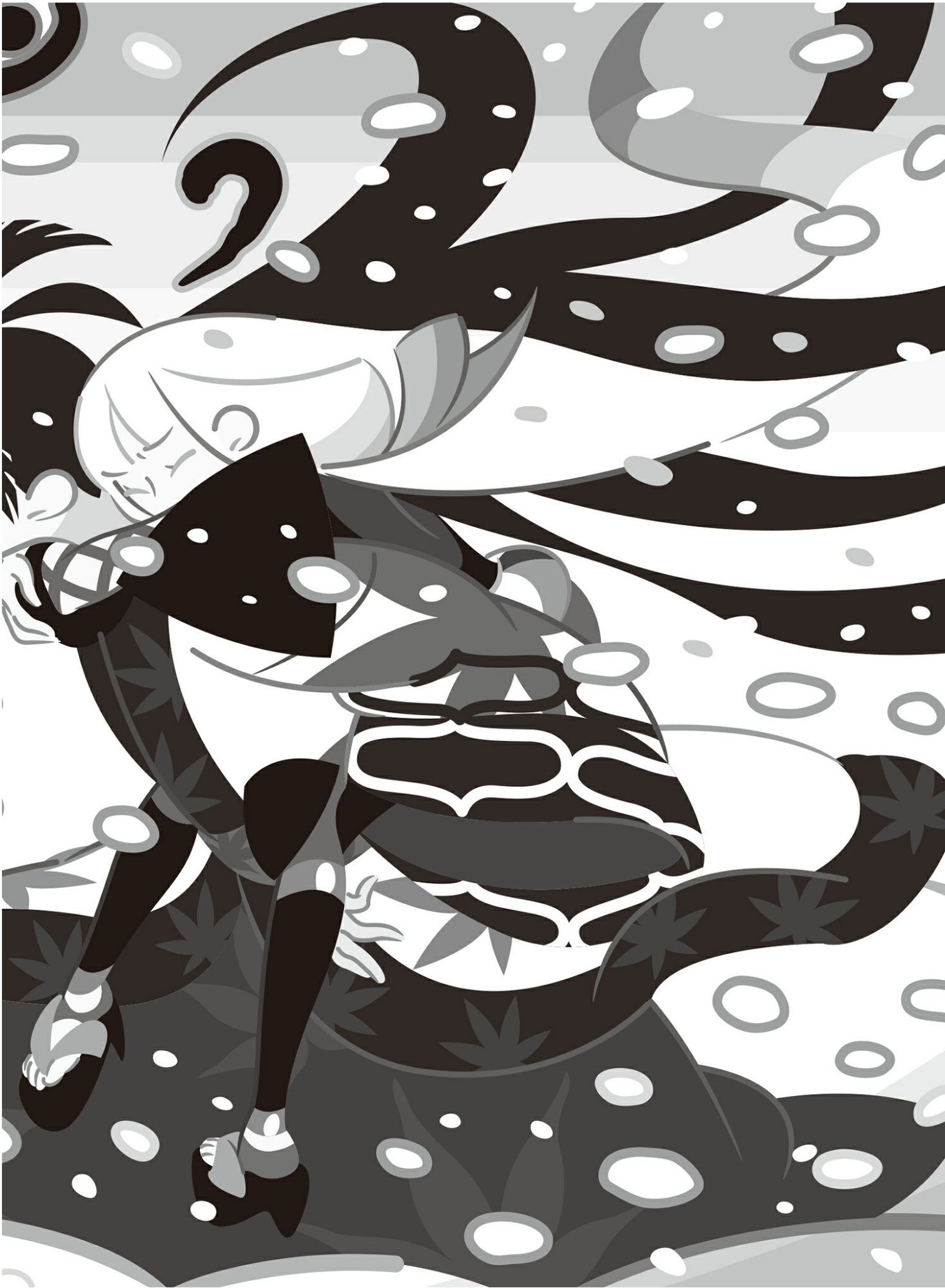
The Schemer and the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu were getting quite

familiar, but her life was on the line, making the situation hard to snicker at.

“So...the Old Shogun must have failed to capture the Twin too.”

“Yes, once he launched the Great Sword Hunt, he caught wind of a sword having been forged here. But his troops faced, at Mt. Odori, the very circumstances we do now. Before they could locate Soto the Twin, their ranks were decimated, and they had to regroup again and again.”





“So it wasn’t Soto the Twin that got them, but the cold.” *Not like we should talk*, Shichika added, since they risked the exact same fate.

“Well, they did manage to locate Soto the Twin and even confronted its owner...but we don’t know what came of that.”

“We don’t know.”

“That’s right.” Togame nodded like usual, but given the cold, perhaps she was just shivering. “I have verified that the Twin has been passed for generations by the House of Itezora—but what I have not heard is how the Itezas beat them, or used the Twin.”

“Wait, were the troops wiped out entirely?”

“Seems so. Whoever survived would have been stranded in the snow. These conditions make a retreat impossible.”

“I see. I guess the backgrounds⁹ of the owners up until now have mostly been a mystery. Not much we can do about that. It’ll be that way from here on out, but once we meet whoever has Soto the Twin, we’ll know. We’ll learn what makes the Twin so special. All the owners so far paired well with their swords.”

The hardest katana in the world, Zetto the Leveler—the most flexible ninja, Komori Maniwa.

The sharpest katana in the world, Zanto the Razor—the fastest swordsman, Ginkaku Uneri.

The rifest katana in the world, Sento the Legion—the most blade-swapping miko, Meisai Tsuruga.

The weakest katana in the world, Hakuto the Whisper—the strongest fallen swordsman, Hakuhei Sabi.

The tightest katana in the world, Zokuto the Armor—the most barreling pirate, Kanara Azekura.

They were the owners.

A sword does not choose who to kill.

But a sword—will choose its owner.

Soto the Twin was one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

It must have chosen an owner perfect for itself—for its blade.

“But how do we know the Twin still belongs to the Itezoras? We’re in trouble if somebody else has taken it.”

“They have it, I’m certain. Ever since the Owari Bakufu designated this place as a Level One Disaster Area, they have been monitoring Mt. Odori non-stop... We would not even be allowed here, if only I didn’t work for the Shogunate.”

“...”

That “if *only*” spoke volumes as to her current state of mind, but in their six months on the road, Shichika had acquired enough human kindness to let such improprieties go unacknowledged.

“Sort of reminds me of Inaba Desert.”

“Inaba Desert is not a Level One Disaster Area...though dangerous terrain.”

“But does that mean the Itezoras have lived here all this time? What keeps them from dying?”

“I know about as much about the Itezoras as I do about the Twin, but I’ve heard that they’re odd ducks.¹⁰ Perhaps their blood can tolerate extreme cold... By the way, since everybody in their village is an Itezora, we won’t need to worry about casualties like last time—everybody is the enemy.”

“The enemy.”

“Yep.”

And enemies of the state at that—much like Ginkaku Uneri, squatting in Inaba Desert, the Itezoras were effectively outlaws who had hunkered down in a Level One Disaster Area despite the bakufu’s repeated warnings.

If necessary—they were okay to kill.

No need to hold back.

“Of course, the sword would be in the possession of a single member of the family. I would prefer a peaceful resolution, but they insist on holing up in this snow-covered mountain. A stubborn bunch...and not about to answer to the bakufu.”

“If they were, they probably would’ve surrendered the Twin to the Old Shogun during his Great Sword Hunt.”

“Likely so... Either way, this time we’re going in blind. Not a single clue to guide us, and no rehearsal.”

“So?” said Shichika fearlessly. “Business as usual.”

He figured this was a decent time to ask her.

“Hey, Togame.”

“What.”

“If we capture Soto the Twin—”

“Not if. When. You’re doing it.”

“Ah, right. Okay. So we’re going to capture Soto the Twin. And then we collect the remaining six—you’ll have all of the Twelve Possessed, just like you wanted.

But once you have them, *what exactly do you plan to do?*”

“ ... ”

Togame couldn't respond. She wasn't being coy; she simply had no answer.

The casual remark went far too deep—but maybe that was why they had to have this conversation halfway up a snowy mountain. In that sense, Shichika had been prudent with his timing.

The same could not be said for *the remarks he had let slip* when they were on their way from Satsuma to Ezo—

Togame thought back to the scene...

They had won themselves the Armor, and were still under the impression that their ship was heading for Owari, when Shichika said almost like an afterthought: *I killed the Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu—my dad, with my own hands.*

There was more: *And your dad, Mastermind of the Rebellion, Kaoyaku of Oshu—Takahito Hida, the one my dad killed. I know you're actually his daughter.*

Just like that. Shichika came out and said it.

Togame hadn't foreseen, even in her wildest dreams, Shichika being privy to that fact—the possibility had never crossed her mind. Albeit for an instant, the keen woman was unable to process his words.

But after all, Togame was a Schemer. She grasped their sense in no time.

“The fact that you killed your father, Mutsue Yasuri...” Togame led with her analysis of the first of his confessions. The second was by far the more important to her, but for that very reason she was saving it for last. Discussing the first item bought her time to think. “It isn't exactly unfavorable news for

me—I hired you because you were Mutsue Yasuri’s successor, but you were stronger, were the sharper sword. This will be crucial to the future of the Sword Hunt.”

“Oh...good.” Shichika seemed reassured by her reaction; his bearing suggested that a load was off his shoulders. “Sis told me to keep it secret, then Meisai Tsuruga said the same thing—so I thought maybe there was a problem. But seeing as you think it’s fine, I’m glad I told you. Thanks, Togame.”

So naive... While Togame had spoken half in earnest, she’d kept the other half of her opinion to herself—and this other half sided with his sister, Nanami Yasuri, and with the Mistress of Triad Shrine, Meisai Tsuruga.

Patricide. There must have been a reason.

A living sword whose unarmed way of fighting was not kenpo, but an extreme form of swordplay—perhaps the secrets of the Kyotoryu were only bequeathed to one kin at a time.¹¹ Perhaps the pupil only became the new master when he surpassed his teacher...

For a school with such a longstanding tradition, this would hardly be unusual. Even Togame knew as much despite lacking any proficiency in the martial arts. And she was not without her sympathy.

She had no intention of reproving or rebuking¹² Shichika for killing his own father.

And yet—“?”

That blank look on his face bore no emotion.

No sorrow for murdering his father.

No remorse for murdering his father.

Nothing of the sort.

Shichika had absolutely no idea why Nanami and Meisai said to keep it secret—

He was a sword.

A sword incarnate.

Killed his father—without feeling.

Having witnessed her own father slaughtered as an ignominious traitor—and her family's massacre, Togame felt hardly indifferent at hearing this.

“Phew...” She stared off into the sea and sighed.

She was the one who had asked.

Togame had asked if he was hiding anything. If that was all it took to make him talk, it was a wonder he'd kept his mouth shut until now. But it was those two women who had counseled restraint...and his sister's advice, especially, had to matter to Shichika.

Meisai had taken his secret to the grave, and if Nanami had told him to keep his mouth shut, she was not about to tell it to the world.

The same would apply—to his second confession.

Togame the Schemer. Her origins were a mystery, yet—Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu, the sworn enemy of the Owari Bakufu, by all accounts slaughtered along with his whole family, had left behind a daughter!

Why was his daughter in the bakufu? Why had she worked her way—into its upper ranks?

And why was she on this Sword Hunt for the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki?

“Who told you about my father?”

She wanted to know whose big mouth¹³ she should sew up. All would be lost if the bakufu learned of her origins—above all else, she could not allow *that nasty woman* to find out.

“Um...”

Togame had tried to keep a neutral tone, but her face betrayed her inner feelings, and Shichika was puzzled by the menace¹⁴ in her eyes.

Uh oh... She had to try and keep her cool. *Mere mention of my father—and I go insane.*

“That ninja who I fought back on the island...Komori Maniwa.”

Is that so, Togame said after a beat.

Komori Maniwa—one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan, and a bloodhound when it came to information.

“Well then. I wouldn’t put it past—that ninja. I spent more time with him than any other Maniwac. Now that you mention it, he did say something along those lines...and you must have heard him too. There’s nothing I can do now about him running his mouth. The real question is whether he told anyone aside from you. It’s safe to say he told the other Bosses, but then again, Hohoh Maniwa didn’t sound as if—”

“I’m pretty sure I’m the only one. He was stuck and had to buy himself some time... Since his plan was to kill me afterwards, I don’t think he expected the secret to get out.”

“Ah, that makes sense. He was competing with the other Bosses—leveraging his intel, so as to keep the upper hand... Well. That slimy ninja had some sneaky

moves.”

While cursing out Komori—something occurred to her.

He heard it from Komori—before he chose me as his owner.

Indeed, he must have chosen me because he knew.

Because he fell for me.

He fell for me.

“Bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad!”

Togame slapped his hand repeatedly. Really laying into him, so hard she nearly left a hand-shaped mark.

Shichika just sat there, but he spoke up.

“Hey, what’d you do that for?”

“Sorry. I was embarrassed, and trying to hide it?”

“That’s how you hide it?”

“Whatever, okay? So my situation hasn’t changed... Maybe it even improved. Now hear this, Shichika—from here on out, you are forbidden from discussing either of these points with anyone but me.”

“Got it.”

Quick answer. It could be seen as a sign of his obedience, just as he had sat there when she slapped him—but it could also be a sign that he had no concept of how serious this was.

He was a sword. He had no sentiment or feeling—and yet.

In Satsuma, he’d shown some quite human emotions toward Azekura...

So that was the crux of it.¹⁵

Since then, it had not come up once in conversation. Not aboard the schooner, before or after they discovered they were bound for Ezo, rather than Owari; nor in Ezo, when they were mushing toward the mountain on their dogsled; nor on Mt. Odori, before or after Shichika had piggybacked Togame—it was as if the two of them forgot it ever happened.

Until now.

But now, all of a sudden, Shichika had put the question to her: “So we’re going to capture Soto the Twin. And then we collect the remaining six—you’ll have all of the Twelve Possessed, just like you wanted. But once you have them, *what exactly do you plan to do?*”

Had he been dying to ask her this whole time, but waiting for a chance like this—the privacy of a snowy mountain, where there was no chance that anyone could listen in? Nothing of the sort, if it was privacy he wanted, there had been lots of other chances.

Of course—thought Togame, growing certain. What mattered to Shichika was her reason for hunting down the swords; he was relatively unconcerned with what she did with the swords once she had them.

He was simply curious, by no means dying to know. He barely cared.

What got him was her motive, not her endgame. The flip side being that Shichika would follow her lead, as her katana, regardless of the way she planned to use the swords—he wanted to be part of her life,¹⁶ whatever that meant, and would stand beside her come what may.

That was the Kyotoryu.

He could kill without an agenda—

Swords had nothing to lose from killing.

“I’m still not sure what I should do.”

“...”

“I’m not dodging the question,¹⁷ it’s just that I’m still figuring it out. I want to be ready to respond to whatever happens, in whatever way necessary. The bottom line is I can’t offer you a single, rigid answer.”

“...”

“You see, this journey is far from over. We’re not even halfway done. We have no choice but to keep on pushing. Until we finish the Sword Hunt for the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki, nothing else matters. No use counting chickens before they hatch.¹⁸ But when we come to the end of the trail, I suppose I’ll have to decide...”

“.....”

“Shichika?”

He was being a bit too quiet, and wondering if she had said something to upset him, Togame leaned over his shoulder to try and see his face. No good—or good, insofar as she’d *noticed*. Shichika, who had been keeping his balance somehow as he trudged on, pitched forward thanks to that slightest shift.

He sank deep into the snow, and Togame was sent flying.

“Gadzooks! What the hell?” she lashed out in her usual fashion, but Shichika was *unresponsive*.

Face down in the snow—he did not move a muscle. In seconds, a barrage of white had covered him.

“Shichika? Shichirin?” Using the cutesy nickname for the first time in ages,

Togame shook his prostrate body—but to no avail. At a loss, she tried to force him to sit upright.

“Ugh,” Shichika moaned.

He had a pained look on his face—but was conscious. Togame was relieved.

“I-I thought you died,” she huffed and took a deep breath. “What happened? Did you stub your toe on a rock buried in the snow?”

Shichika would not answer her question. He just sat there—wearing that pained look.

“H-Hey, Shichika?”

“My hands...” he said finally. “I can’t move my hands and feet.”

“Not frostbite!” Togame cried into the sky. “You imbecile, why didn’t you say that you were freezing? Why did you have to act like such a tough guy?”¹⁹

“B-But I wasn’t cold... My body just stopped doing what I asked it to...”

“How dull could you possibly be?!”

Ignoramus! Togame cursed him at the top of her lungs, but her voice was engulfed by the blizzard.

“You stupid idiot... What’s a kenpo master without his hands and feet?”

“I-I told you, it’s not kenpo, it’s swordplay...”

“Fool! This is no time for semantics. You underestimate how lethal cold can be!”

“Look who’s talking...but yeah, I guess this is what ‘cold’ feels like?”

Haphazard Island, where Shichika was raised, was situated in the Sea of Japan where winter brought snow. Yet he grew up with a tenuous grasp of what it

meant to feel the cold, wearing just his rags the whole year round even in that climate.

Dull as he may be, the cold had slowly but surely sunk its fangs²⁰ into his body. On this snowy mountain, Shichika had gained a visceral understanding of what it means to freeze.

As he had said himself, they were past the point of no return.

Too late now.

“Okay, so...”

Togame was perplexed. This, indeed, was no joke.

She never thought Shichika would tumble, but he had piggybacked her the entire hike up Mt. Odori, serving as her wall. And the wall had crumbled, inevitably, one might say.

It was unclear how far they had to go to reach the village of the Itezoras—the distance could not possibly be gauged in the whiteout of the snowy mountain.

Trouble ahead—and trouble behind.

“This...is bad, really bad...”

She would have to let Shichika rest. If the frost bit any deeper into his extremities, he would cease to function as a sword. The need for refuge was immediate, but in these blizzard conditions, discovering a place to hide away could take forever. Meanwhile, Togame could soon expect to find herself in the same state as Shichika—not soon, but any moment, without him serving as her wall. When it came to physical endurance, she fell well below the norm.

Level One Disaster Area. Togame was learning the true meaning of the phrase.

“Uh...” Shichika—closed his eyes.

Perchance to sleep.

Forever sleep.

“No, no! Don’t fall asleep. You’ll die!”

While this may smack of mountain rescue melodrama, it was no exaggeration—Shichika was on the verge of dying. Togame smacked the hell out of his cheeks, but the fact that he just sat there was no longer a sign of his obedience.

Togame began to feel woozy herself. Already.

“No—not yet. What do we—what do we do now?”

Still she refused to give up. Even in these cruel conditions, where the temperature could surpass thirty degrees below freezing, circumstances anyone else would call a stalemate, Togame racked her brains—it went far beyond persistence.

It was abnormal.

She was obsessed.

Obsessed with avenging her father.

Obsessed with avenging her family.

Pressed about her plans, she’d said, *I’m still not sure what I should do*—but this level of conviction made it clear that she had long decided what to do.

To the Yanari Shogunate—to the Owari Bakufu.

To those who had murdered her father, and slaughtered her family.

She knew exactly what to do.

She would not rest until²¹ she reached her goal—by whatever means necessary, regardless of the circumstance.

Of course she played dumb around Shichika. She had no choice.

After abandoning everything else, all she had left was a single goal.

Call it her agenda. Her reason for being.

Her agenda was everything—but her sword had nothing of the sort.

All Shichika needed was a reason—but Togame valued nothing but the endgame, in the name of which she made her every move!

“Excuse me...”

Suddenly, out of the snow, through a blizzard that could swallow any scream—a voice, nondescript and quiet but unmistakably directed at Togame, landed in her ear.

Togame looked up.

To see a snow fairy.²²

■ ■

What mattered was the motive, not the endgame.

Togame was not mistaken in this observation about Shichika.

But he wondered about one thing.

He had to wonder: *What exactly do you plan to do?*

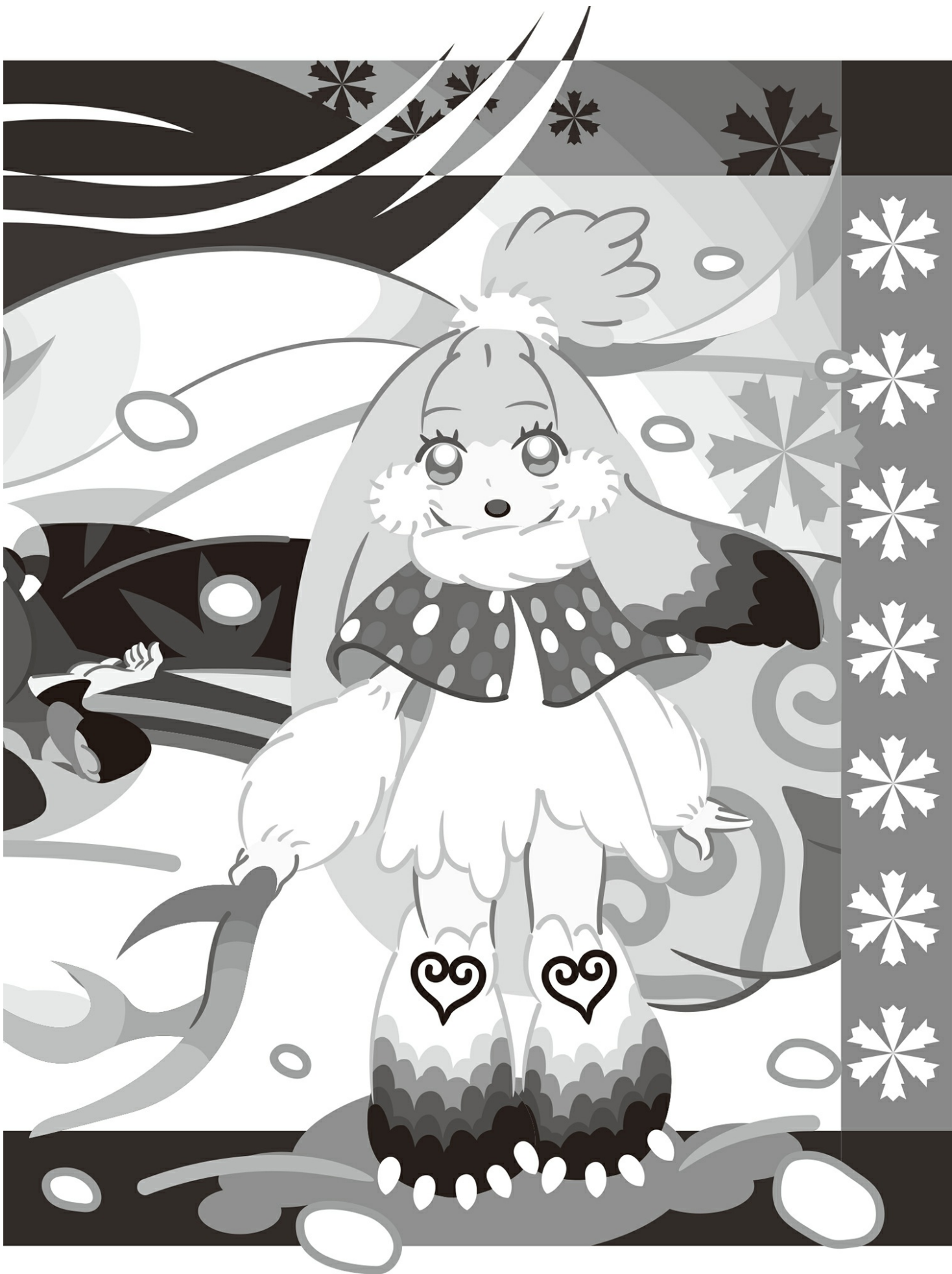
He was really asking about his own future—when the Sword Hunt was over, what would become of the sword known as the Kyotoryu? *What exactly did she plan to do with him?*

The perpetrator of the murder of her father, Takahito Hida—was Mutsue Yasuri, Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu. In which case, the entire Kyotoryu, including Shichika, son of the perpetrator, were subject to her retribution.

What would Togame do? When the Sword Hunt was over, what would she do about the sword whose name was Shichika Yasuri?

Regardless of her plans, he would stand beside her, come what may—but now he could not rid the question from his mind, unlike when they had started on their journey.





¹ 踊山 ODORIYAMA “Dancing Mountain” fictional

² 絶対凍土 ZETTAI TŌDO “totally frozen land” vs. 絶対零度 ZETTAI REIDO absolute zero (kelvin) ³ 水無月 MINAZUKI “month of water” sixth month of the Japanese lunar calendar ⁴ 氷点下二十二度 HYŌTENKA NIJŪNIDO -7.6 degrees Fahrenheit ⁵ 壹級災害指定地域 IKKYŪ SAIGAI SHITEI CHIKI uses old script 壹 for “one” but cheekily anachronistic ⁶ 背に腹は代えられない SENI HARA WA KAERARENAI “can’t give up your belly for your back”

⁷ 姦計 KANKEI (usu. evil) plot 姦 KAN coerced or illicit sex (女 ON’NA woman 3x) ⁸ 完璧に書き換えられ KANPEKI NI KAKIKAE RARE “be perfectly overwritten”

⁹ 氏素性 UJISUJŌ provenance, lineage 氏 UJI clan 素性 SUJŌ “source nature” birth, origin ¹⁰ 特殊な一族 TOKUSHU NA ICHIZOKU a special/peculiar tribe ¹¹ 一子相伝 ISSHI SŌDEN (an art) handed down to only one child ¹² 批判、ないし非難 HIHAN, NAISHI HINAN criticize, or denounce ¹³ 漏洩元 RŌEI MOTO source of leaked information

¹⁴ 剣幕 KENMAKU “sword curtain” purported to derive from 陰悪 KEN’AKU fierce ¹⁵ 肝要 KANYŌ what matters most 肝 KIMO liver; guts 要 KANAME pivot ¹⁶ 生き様 IKIZAMA way of going through life

¹⁷ とぼけて TOBOKETE playing dumb

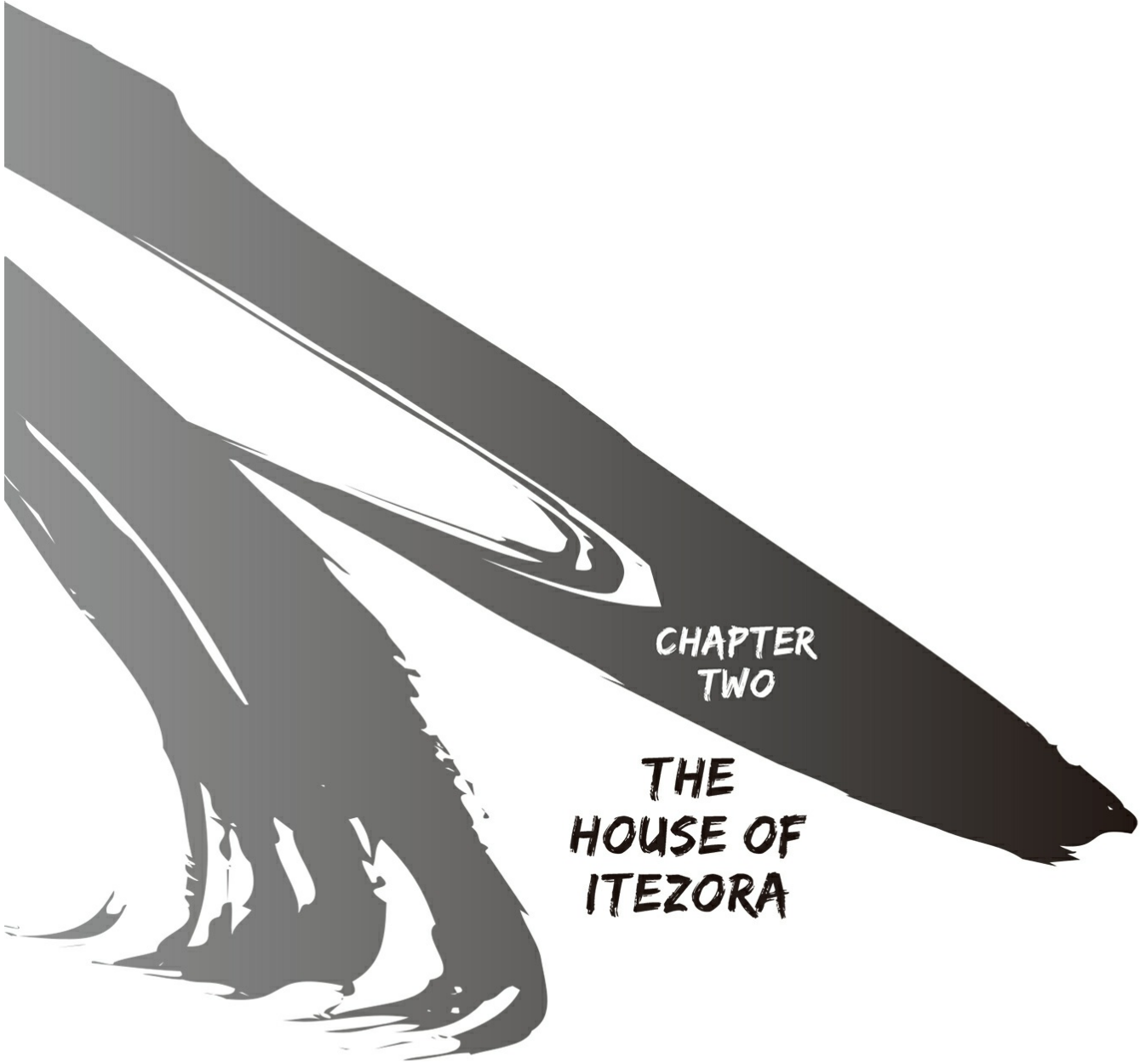
¹⁸ 取らぬ狸の皮算用 TORANU TANUKI NO KAWAZANYŌ “peddling the skin of a tanuki one has yet to trap”

19 やせ我慢 YASE GAMAN “skinny perseverance”

20 蝕む MUSHIBAMU eat away at

21 腹積もり HARAZUMORI “stomach is ready”

22 雪女 YUKI ON’NA “snow woman” vs. 雪男 YUKI OTOKO “(abominable) snow man”



CHAPTER
TWO

THE
HOUSE OF
ITEZORA



Two shadows sped up the path, though no path stretched before them.

Too fast for any eye to catch, not only for their velocity, but for the special way they moved. Out of nowhere—they were past you, maneuvering with traceless stealth.

Wearing sleeveless ninja garb, chains wrapped around their bodies.

One of the shadows was “The Divine Phoenix,” Hohoh Maniwa.

And the other shadow was “The Nosey Otter,” Kawauso Maniwa.

Two of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan, and traveling together—cruising at a constant speed.

Perceptible to none.

Disturbing not a leaf.

“About that,” began Kawauso.

Even running at this speed, his breathing was untaxed—and speaking on the run seemed not to slow him down. As if his vocal cords were divorced from the workings of his body.

“This puts us in a tough position. I think the Bosses all agree we work better alone, but Kyoken takes that to an extreme. Join forces? Gimme a break, Hohoh. I think that you can say goodbye to your alliance.”

“What’s done is done.”

Hohoh was no more out of breath than Kawauso. They were able to converse while running at exactly the same pace.

“I underestimated the extraordinary lengths Kyoken would go to for a fallen comrade—I owe you an apology. I’m sorry I got you mixed up in it.”

“Don’t be silly, Hohoh. As Captain of the Beast Unit, I’m responsible for her behavior... That being said, if we catch up with her, I’m not expecting to win her over. Not to sound like Umigame, but if anyone can persuade Kyoken, it’s either you, Hohoh...or Penguin, in terms of ninjutsu. Oh, right—” Kawauso remembered something. “I meant to ask you... Along the lines of what Umigame said, do you think the Kyotoryu can vanquish Kyoken? In your opinion, Hohoh.”

“No battle is over until it’s over. But in this case, it matters little who would win—I intend to put a stop to this before things get that far. It’s far too soon—for us to jeopardize¹ our alliance with Togame, the little Schemer.”

“Sure...but all the same. Even if you could win Kyoken over, do you really think that we can catch her, in her current state, before she gets to Ezo? You’re no faster than me. According to Penguin, Soto the Twin is on Mt. Odori, a Level One Disaster Area. Course, for a couple of ninjas like us, a Disaster Area is basically a playground, but chasing someone up a snow-covered mountain is slow going.”

“Certainly, our primary objective is to waylay Kyoken, but we need a backup plan, in case that doesn’t work out. If Kyoken confronts the Schemer and the Kyotoryu, rips them to bits, and leaves them dead—we’re good, although this wouldn’t be my first choice. But if she doesn’t, we’re in trouble. If Kyoken fights and loses, and she’s the one left dead...the Twelve Bosses lose yet another of our ranks, and the alliance falls apart. Worst-case scenario.”

“Absolutely.”

“You must not let that happen, Kawauso.” Hohoh was extremely nonchalant. “Even if it means that you must die.”

“Understood”—Kawauso matched Hohoh in terms of nonchalance. “In my career as ninja, I’ve basically seen it all, but dying would be a first...in fact, I’m almost looking forward to it. That dope Komori must be lonely on the other side.”

“I wonder about the Itezoras...” Hohoh said with a sigh. “Owners of Soto the Twin, the Itezoras have inhabited² the Level One Disaster Area of Mt. Odori for generations.”

“Based on what Penguin said, they’re insane...but then again, so is Soto the Twin. I guess a weirdo sword will choose a weirdo owner.”

“It would be unwise to see this as the Schemer and the Kyotoryu versus Kyoken, with us doing our best to stop her, too. The role played by the Itezoras, owners of Soto the Twin, remains to be seen.”

“I mean, these guys are hunkered down in a Level One Disaster Area. That’s pretty weird, even by ninja standards.”

“Step on it.”

As if this talk was making him impatient, Hohoh bumped up their cruise-controlled velocity by several notches. Kawauso, who must have felt the same, was not a step behind him—

And yet neither of them spotted Kyoken.

Of course not—Kyoken was leagues ahead of them.

At present, she was the fastest of the Maniwa.



They were led into a cave.

“Led” may be the wrong word, since Shichika could not move on his own, and Togame was not even remotely strong enough to drag him. Even if it weren’t for the vicious cold, such a feat would have been impossible.

The snow fairy had carried Shichika on her back the whole way to the cave.

She introduced herself as Konayuki Itezora.³

Turns out—she was no snow fairy, but certifiably human. In snow so thick Togame could not see a foot in front of her, the visibility left much to be desired. Her eyes had simply played a trick on her.





Fair-skinned, with long hair—she was a child of tender years, around ten or so.

And yet *despite her tiny size*, Konayuki Itezora had hoisted Shichika onto her back and carried him all the way to the cave, leading Togame.

This was no normal kiddo. And if her name was Konayuki Itezora...

Could she be? She had to be.

One of the Itezoras—owners of Soto the Twin.

“Whew...I almost died back there.”

It took Shichika just fifteen minutes by the fireside to snap out of his groggy state. Togame was startled by the speed of his recovery (since a quarter of an hour by the fire was not enough to stop her shivering), but what startled her the most was where they were: a den at the rear of a cave.

Firewood was stocked up in a corner. At first, she wondered how any wood found in the mountain snow could burn, but the space functioned as a sort of kiln, where the burning fire dried whatever wood was found outside. Smoked meat, of a wild hare or something like it, hung from the roof of the cave. Konayuki was dressed in pelts of white, which looked exceedingly warm.

Togame’s guess that the Itezoras could tolerate extreme cold—may not in fact be wrong, but on top of that, it seemed they had the knowhow necessary to survive in snowy climes.

“You guys really pushed your luck, climbing the mountain dressed like that. If I hadn’t passed you, you definitely would have died.”

“We’re much obliged,” Togame expressed her thanks with grace.

There was no other appropriate response.

“But on the other hand, I’m really impressed. Especially by you, Mister,

carrying a person halfway up the mountain on your back. That takes a lot of grit, for an earthling.⁴ It helps that you have enormous muscles.”

Togame squinted at the strange word *earthling*, but she surmised it meant “anyone from below the mountain”—essentially, not a member of the Itezoras.

After generations spent in isolation, as the only group of people on Mt. Odori, the Itezoras could be forgiven a few bizarre expressions.

And yet...

Did this girl, Konayuki, actually live here? As an “emergency shelter,” it served its function splendidly. You could not ask for a cozier grotto, but living here would be another story. The cave had plenty of space for one, or three people at best. With Shichika and Togame in there, the space was starting to feel cramped. Because Konayuki was a child and Togame was petite, it was not exactly claustrophobic, but two people the size of Shichika would fill the space entirely, unable to move an inch.

Halfway up the mountain?

It was baffling to think that after so many hours hiking they were only halfway up, but even stranger was why Konayuki chose to live in such a place.

“Talk about grit! That was amazing, carrying me on your back like that. And you’re so little!”

Shichika seemed genuinely impressed with Konayuki. Despite his four and twenty years, he had the mind⁵ of someone closer to her age, and did not affect his speech because she was a child.

“How are you so strong?”

“I gotta be, how else could I live up on a mountain?”

Konayuki was not the least bit shy about her strength.

“Hey, Miss, Miss,” said the girl. “Could you tell me your name?”

Right—they had yet to introduce themselves.

Togame gave her name: “Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu.”

She had hesitated as to whether to include the part about the bakufu, but decided it would not make any difference to an Itezora.

First they would recover their strength and wait out the snow (according to Konayuki, it was particularly bad that day, even for a Level One Disaster Area like Mt. Odori, a detail which depressed Togame, who had not hoped to die of rotten luck)—and after that the Schemer would make Konayuki guide them to the village at the summit. She decided it behooved them to be as straightforward as possible, although if she could manage, she would prefer not to explain that they were here to round up Soto the Twin—

“And I’m Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu,” said Shichika, giving his name too.

“Miss Togame, Mister Shichika. Okay, got it! My name’s Konayuki Itezora,” the kid introduced herself for the second time, bowing her head low.

Not afraid of grownups.

She sure was charming.

At her age, I was definitely not such a good kid, Togame told herself with a granule of self-deprecation.

But this was no time to be gushing about adorable kiddos.

“Shichika,” Togame called to her katana. “Any better?”

“Not exactly perfect⁶...but I can mostly feel my hands and feet again. Fire is amazing.”

“Hmm...”

So what if Shichika had fallen. His physical abilities were unbelievable. But to play it safe, thought Togame, they should probably spend the night here in the cave, and plan on leaving in the morning, when the snow let up.

“Well, Konayuki—” Togame turned to the young girl. “Far be it from me to ask a favor, when you’ve just now saved our lives...but you’re someone I had hoped to meet. Tomorrow morning, could we bother you to bring us to your village...home of the Itezoras?”

“Huh?” Konayuki puckered her lips in confusion. “Miss Togame, did you come here to see us?”

Were it not the case, they would have had no reason to set foot on Mt. Odori, Level One Disaster Area that it was, but Konayuki was evidently not expecting this. She looked genuinely surprised.

“Now that you mention it, yes,” Shichika said, as if finally catching up to what had been bugging Togame all along. “Why live in a cave like this? I’m glad that you were here to save us, but unless you’re out here hunting...what’s the point?”

“Yeah. Uhm, okay. I’m not sure how to put this.”

Konayuki did not seem keen on answering Shichika’s question, as if it involved something she would rather not explain.

*Has she been run out of town?*⁷

The thought flashed across Togame’s mind. *She was just a little girl*, but then

again, her age would have made her vulnerable. Togame was not privy to the customs of the Itezoras, and knew nothing of their way of life, but some situation must have forced Konayuki to live outside the village—it was no good to ask for her to lead them. The most they could hope for was directions.

Togame arrived at that conclusion in a fraction of a second, but the reality was a far cry from the Schemer’s speculations.

“Our village was *wiped out* by last month’s avalanche,” Konayuki explained.

“W-Wiped out?”

“Yes. The only person left alive—was me.”

“...!”

This message stunned Togame and Shichika alike, but Konayuki, who had weathered the disaster, wore a casual expression.

Wiped out... The Itezoras, who not even the Old Shogun, in his tireless campaign for power, could invade, were wiped out by an avalanche?

“Not to bring up Inaba Desert—but sounds like these guys were no match for nature either,” grumbled Shichika. “How does this affect the Sword Hunt?”

After twenty formative years on a desert island, he had a lot of catching up to do. He could have been more circumspect. Without a single word of consolation for Konayuki—newly orphaned, a little girl bereft of her entire family, he quickly voiced his concern about the sword. Even Togame, who shared his urgent concern for the safety of the katana, saw this as incredibly insensitive.

She gave Shichika the stink eye. He had no clue why, but seemed to recognize that he’d done something to anger her, and hung his head.

—Wiped out her entire family.

The overlap with her experience was surreal.

The House of Hida, led by the rebel Takahito Hida.

Slaughtered, every one of them—except Togame, who was just a girl.

“Sword Hunt?”

Konayuki was not hurt or even fazed by Shichika’s insensitive remark. He had perked her up.

Who was the child here? Konayuki could easily have had the mind of someone older.

“Right, the Sword Hunt,” said Togame.

She was unsure whether to address this, but with the House of Itezora gone, there was no sense in being oblique.⁸ This was the ideal time to ask her what had happened to the sword—if the entire village had been buried by the snow, it stood to reason⁹ they would have to dig it out.

“Hence the purpose of our visit. We are here to ask the Itezoras—to hand over their sword, Soto the Twin, one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.”

If Konayuki Itezora was the last remaining member of her clan, that meant she represented their interests in any negotiation. In which case, Togame could not treat her like a child; she would not dream of being as insensitive as Shichika had been just now, but she could only be as delicate as circumstance demanded.

“Have you not heard of such a tale from family or acquaintances? How once upon a time the government came to your mountain, saying the same thing?”

“Nope...never heard of anything like that,” replied Konayuki, but there was something about her tone. “As you can see, I’m just a kid. I don’t want to get

involved in complicated grownup stuff. Soto the Twin...hmm, doesn't ring a bell... What kind of sword is it, anyway? Was this some kind of family heirloom?"

"..."

Could she really—be oblivious?

Like she said, it fell within the realm of possibility that her family had not told her yet, because she was too young.

If so, Togame was stuck.

If the kid was asking them what kind of sword it was, they could not hope for so much as a hint.

"Nobody in your family was a swordsman, or used a sword?" asked Shichika. He had merely spoken his mind, but in fact, the question was insightful. The Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki had one common characteristic, their venom, and that venom was so potent that just holding one made you want to kill—it made its owner an assassin who lived to carry out its murderous potential. An exception the likes of Meisai Tsuruga, who had tried to use the venom to do good, only proved the rule.

Whoever they were, the Itezas could not have been immune.

One thing was for sure. Swordsman or not, *whoever* owned the Twin—had used the Twin.

"Hmm." Konayuki shrugged, and scrunched up her face. "We did everything, from hunting and cooking to building things, without using a knife—oh, wait. The eldest son of the chief¹⁰ did have..."

"Have what?" Togame leaned forward to hear what Konayuki had to say. Too

far...almost falling into the fire—she scrambled back to safety.

“Are you okay?”

“Ah, yes. Fine. Young lady, tell me more about the chief’s son.”

Actually, Togame had singed her hair, but she was not about to interrupt this conversation.

“Um...I remember hearing that he used a sword to hunt, but I never saw the sword myself, and I’m not sure whether it’s the one you mentioned...what was it again, the Soto?”

“...What do you think, Shichika?”

Togame had her own opinions, but for now, she was curious what he had to say, since after all, he was a sword, and felt that lifeforce or whatever when he beheld one of the Twelve Possessed.

“I dunno,” he said, predictably. “I wouldn’t get so hung up on this lifeforce thing, Togame—it’s nothing, probably just a hunch.”

“Hmm...I was thinking that if all else fails, we’d go to where the village used to be, before the avalanche, and use your special sense to find the sword...but it sounds like that is not an option.”

His special sense would do them little good heading in blind. Besides, they had little hope of finding anything by digging around randomly¹¹ in the snow... and here she had hoped to get some kind of lead from Konayuki.

“I suppose the only option left is digging in the snow where the chief’s house used to be...though I suppose after the avalanche, we won’t have any way of knowing if we’re there.”

“Oh. In that case, how about I run up there and grab it for you?”

Togame, stumped, had voiced a tedious plan of action one could hardly call a scheme, but Konayuki offered her the world like it was nothing.

“I lived in the village ten whole years. I’m sure I can find it, one way or another.”

“Uh...run up there, now?”

The middle of a blizzard was no time to step outside—even for an Itezora.

“Don’t worry. I’m not sure about earthlings, but to us it makes no difference how hard it snows. We’re made of snow.” Konayuki giggled. “We? Oops, I meant me, since I’m the only one left.”

This was not an easy thing to laugh at. The declaration left Togame silent, but Konayuki saw nothing to worry about and stood decisively.

The roof of the cave was low enough that Shichika would have bumped his noggin, but Konayuki and Togame had plenty of headroom.¹²

“I’ll be back with it soon, okay? You wait here, Miss Togame and Mister Shichika...”

“Wait, you’re going now?”

She could get there, that was safe to say. This mountain was like a backyard for the Itezas; a blizzard was no different from a spring breeze. But digging a sword out of a village buried in the snow was not exactly child’s play.

Or maybe it was the sort of thing only a child can do. Konayuki shrugged off Togame’s warnings and donned another fur before running out of the cave.

Then it was silent.

After a time, a log burst¹³ in the fire.

“What’s up with her...the girl.”

Inclined as they both were to chase her, neither Togame nor Shichika was about to run out after her, not with the weather the way it was. They had no choice but to do as she said, and wait there in the cave for her to come back.

“Grab it for you... Sounds like the sword is ours. As long as it’s in fact the Twin...” Shichika had to wonder, and for good reason.

“I don’t know... I’m not sure how the other Itezoras saw Soto the Twin, but this girl does not appear to have any attachment to it. Which means...” Togame paced herself, thinking through the situation. “If the sword the chief’s eldest son used when he went hunting is in fact Soto the Twin, and Konayuki hands it over in one piece...we just might finish this stage diplomatically, without a fight.”

“Sounds like it’s all or nothing.” He had a point. They would either break their backs and come up empty, or get the sword without lifting a finger. “But can an avalanche bury an entire village?” he asked. “The Itezoras must have lived here hundreds of years. Kind of a disappointing¹⁴ ending.”

“Hmm...that is strange, now that you mention it. But endings are always disappointing. As a rule.”

“Is that why? Is that why Konayuki is being so nice to us?”

“Huh?”

“She must be lonely, losing everything so suddenly.”

“ ... ”

Togame had overlooked this perspective. Hearing a perspective she had overlooked from Shichika, who was normally so insensitive, surprised her.

Had he consciously detected loneliness...and not in *himself*, but in *another*?

If he truly recognized that other people have emotions, this island monkey had come a long way.

When Togame lost everything, the Owari Bakufu was there to blame. By rallying her aimless feelings under the ensign of anger, she had regained a sense of purpose.

But the same could not be said for Konayuki.

If nature was to blame, she may never find her way.

Sure of nothing—but her loneliness.

“Hey, Shichika.”

“Yeah?”

“I need to think this through out loud, so hear me out without getting upset. It’s like you said. We might capture Soto the Twin without lifting a finger—however, if negotiations fail, and battle is our only option...can you fight?”

“Huh? Fight who?” Shichika was puzzled. “I thought the Itezoras were wiped out.”

“Yes—but there’s one left. Konayuki.”

“Yeah, I can fight her,” he answered instantly. “She’s a kid. It should be easy. Plus, I’m almost a hundred percent.”

“...Right.”

A sword—will not choose who to kill, no matter what?

*But what is there to worry about? I am his owner. As long as I can keep his spirit under reins, we’re fine. I was just checking to see how he’d react. The odds of Shichika clashing swords with Konayuki are miniscule.*¹⁵

The girl would need to find Soto the Twin within the ruins of the Itezoras' village—and decide to kill them.

Just having one will make you want to kill.

The venom—of Kiki Shikizaki.

Since Konayuki was not a swordsman, its effects on her would not be so dramatic, as evinced by the fact that the eldest son only used the sword for hunting. In which case, there was a chance they did not actually have much to fear.

I should not have let her go alone.

Nursing this regret, Togame threw another log onto the fire—and so.

While waiting for Konayuki Itezora to come back to the cave, Togame the Schemer considered the situation from every angle, imagining all kinds of possibilities and eventualities—but the reason Konayuki returned to the village alone, in other words, *why she did not want Togame or Shichika coming anywhere near the village* was beyond even the Schemer. She would have to wait.



Konayuki returned from the village at the summit before dawn the next day. Togame and Shichika had snuggled up to conserve heat, but after waking to the sound of footsteps, they saw Konayuki. (Because Togame was still groggy,

essentially half-asleep, she felt no shame that a child had seen her cuddled up with Shichika like that.)

Sure enough, Konayuki carried a sword in one of her hands. But one look was enough to tell both Shichika and Togame that to their chagrin, the sword was not Soto the Twin—a conclusion they could not be blamed for reaching.

Reason being, it was not even made of metal—but of stone, seemingly by chipping away chunks of rock. Lacking an iota¹⁶ of the grace of a katana, fired from the finest steel, the sword was more of a club, its blade roughhewn. One might even call the thing inelegant.

It measured¹⁷ about two and a half feet long.

No pattern of the kind observed on swords of steel.

Nor a scabbard, nor a handguard—a stone club, shaped basically the same at both ends.

“You look upset. Isn’t this the sword that you were looking for, Miss Togame?”

“Unfortunately...no.”

Feeling bad for Konayuki, who had brought back the wrong sword for nothing, Togame tried to hide just how unfortunate this was by nodding painfully. But Konayuki had more to say.

“Then how come the *certificate*¹⁸ that I found next to it said that it was Soto the Twin?”

“Huh?”

“Want to take a look?”

With that—Konayuki tossed down the sword for them to see. No way to

handle a legitimate katana, but not necessarily a problem for what was basically a stone club.

But that did not make it safe.

Togame reached out to grab the sword but missed it entirely,¹⁹ whereupon it sank into the earth.

Sank—down.

Grinding—into the packed earth of the cave.

“...!”

Togame snapped back her hand.

But Shichika was leaning over. He reached into the hole to grab the sword... and then reached down with both arms.

Same deal, one arm or both. The sword refused to budge—not even for Shichika!

The muscles that had overpowered Dread Captain Azekura, the giant pirate who stood one or two heads above Shichika, could not dislodge the sword, much less lift it from the hole.

But touching the sword, he could sense it.

He knew—this was the sword.

Lifeforce.

In that moment, Shichika Yasuri thought back to when he faced the polar opposite of this sword, two months earlier—

On Ganryu Island, one of the Two Great Holy Sites for swordsmen.

Against Hakuhei Sabi, the Fallen Swordsman, Strongest in Japan.

Hakuto the Whisper—one of the Twelve Possessed, whose blade possessed an otherworldly beauty, thinness, and fragility...

So light.

This sword was its opposite. Its reverse.

Clumsy, thick, strong—and heavy!

As now abundantly clear, this Mutant Blade had been designed by legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki around the principle of weight.

Soto the Twin!

“What? Hey!”

Shichika had another reason to be astonished. Wide-eyed—he looked up at Konayuki Itezora, who had not moved since she flung the sword.

So heavy that once tossed, its gravity had made it sink into the earth, and too heavy for a muscleman like²⁰ Shichika to lift—yet Konayuki Itezora had held it, in one hand, as if it were no more than a stick!

“Oh, but if you’re wrong, that’s probably not a bad thing. The certificate said that I’m not supposed to just give it to anyone,” Konayuki chirped away, not fathoming the meaning behind Shichika’s gaze. “If an earthling shows up saying that they really want the sword, it says that I’m supposed to use it to test if they’re *worthy*.”

¹ 崩す KUZUSU to make (something) collapse or crumble

² 生息 SEISOKU occupy (a habitat) 生きる IKIRU to live 息 IKI breath

³ 凍空こなゆき ITEZORA KONAYUKI “Powder Snow under a Frozen Sky”

- ⁴ 地表人 CHIHYŌJIN “resident of the ground surface”
- ⁵ 精神年齢 SEISHIN NENREI mental age
- ⁶ 全快 ZENKAI complete recovery
- ⁷ 村八分 MURA HACHIBU ostracized 村 MURA village 八分 HACHIBU eight-tenths (excluded from)
- ⁸ 伏せる FUSERU conceal; lay low
- ⁹ 順当 JUNTŌ as expected (by a sequence of events)
- ¹⁰ 村長 SONCHŌ leader of a village
- ¹¹ 闇雲 YAMIKUMO blindly 闇 YAMI darkness 雲 KUMO cloud
- ¹² 頭数個分 ATAMA SŪKOBUN “several heads of space”
- ¹³ 爆ぜる HAZERU explode, pop (as here, usually describes burning wood)
- ¹⁴ あっけない AKKENAI over too soon
- ¹⁵ 万分之一 MANBUN NO ICHI one in ten thousand
- ¹⁶ 欠片 KAKERA fleck
- ¹⁷ 刃渡り HAWATARI blade length
- ¹⁸ 但し書き TADASHI GAKI written conditions
- ¹⁹ 目測を誤る MOKUSOKU WO AYAMARU improperly gauge a distance
- ²⁰ 力自慢の CHIKARA JIMAN NO “the strength-proud”

CHAPTER
THREE

**PRINCESS
NEGATIVE**



In Satsuma, the dialogue between Hohoh Maniwa and Togame the Schemer resulted in the Maniwa Clan and the Owari Bakufu forging an alliance (although Togame was quick to characterize it as an armistice)—and in exchange for agreeing to take part in the deal, she received several pieces of intelligence.

Namely, the whereabouts of three of the six Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki whose owner and location she did not know—but there was more.

That woman was up to no good at Owari Castle.

Shichika was there at the time and could not help but hear their conversation—thanks to a subsequent incident,¹ however, the memory had been entirely expunged.

Togame certainly remembered.

How could she forget? This woman—had been her arch-nemesis.² *Had been*—when Togame departed on her Sword Hunt, she was confident that she'd drubbed the woman out for good. But then Hohoh told her otherwise.

This always happened. Each time she thought she finished her, the woman just popped up again.

Almost like she was invulnerable. Almost like she was indomitable.

Almost—like another me.

Hohoh had referred to her as Princess Negative.

Because nobody knew her actual name.

Just as Togame was known as the Schemer, that woman was known within the bakufu by only one name—Princess Negative.³



Things just got real weird—thought Shichika.

On the Sword Hunt, it was rare for things to go as planned and preconceived—more than rare, it was perhaps unprecedented—but this may as well have been a sign of pre-established harmony.⁴

Soto the Twin—one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

Owned by Konayuki Itezora, of the House of Itezora.

Now Shichika was facing Konayuki, taking Kyotoryu Form One, the Suzuran—and Konayuki, as you may have guessed, was ready with Soto the Twin. The way that she held the sword, whose length was not so different from her height,⁵ was not exactly graceful, in polar contrast to the equipoise with which Hakuhei Sabi had handled the Whisper—and yet the blizzarding conditions suited her quite nicely.

Finish diplomatically, without a fight.

A nice idea, but no such luck—this episode would not be wrapping up so easily.

The sword known as Soto the Twin, while unbeknownst to little Konayuki, had been closely guarded by the House of Itezora.

Entrusted by Kiki Shikizaki.

Designated the veritable sheaths of the Twin, the clan would bestow the sword upon the *chosen one*⁶ when he or she finally came to the village.

Chosen one, huh?

Shichika thought this sounded pretty fishy, but then again, Kiki Shikizaki had believed the sword would choose its owner, and not the other way around. So maybe there were chosen ones.

But in that case, Shichika could not see how Soto the Twin had chosen anybody but the Itezoras.

The girl's strength was monstrous.

Unparalleled⁷—no other word sufficed.

Konayuki had thought nothing of carrying Shichika back to the cave.

And evidently, her monstrous strength was not unique to her, but shared by the entire Itezora family. In fact, Konayuki (still a child) said she was on the low end of the spectrum...

Thus, it would appear that Kiki Shikizaki had bestowed Soto the Twin upon the House of Itezora—no one else could handle the Twin, not in the entire world.

At least it was impossible for Shichika.

And thus impossible for Kanara Azekura.

Even Hakuhei Sabi, once the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, would have found this sword impossible to wield. However deft with Hakuto the Whisper, the most difficult sword to handle, he could not so much pick up Soto the Twin.

Even Meisai Tsuruga, to whom every sword was fair game, would have met her match⁸ against the Twin.

But not this girl—Konayuki Itezora held it like a stick.

As if the thing was not even remotely heavy.

Held it in one hand, ungracefully.

Horrifying.

Honestly, he was horrified. According to a family rule, Konayuki was to use the sword to test whether they were “worthy”—child or not, this fight was not going to be child’s play. Mistake this for a game of Let’s Play Samurai,⁹ and he would get more than a skinned knee.

If she comes at me with her monstrous strength—

“...”

Hold on. He could not lose sight of the fact that it was all she had—after encountering so many swordsmen thus far on their journey, Shichika could tell that Konayuki had no idea what she was doing with the Twin.

She was just imitating the way she’d seen it wielded. Her lack of grace could not be blamed exclusively on the clunky sword, or on her height. She was a total amateur.

“Are you ready, Mister Shichika?”

Her carefree tone and cheery grin suggested that for Konayuki, this was in fact a game of Let’s Play Samurai.

None of the outrage or gravity you would expect—from someone following a family rule.

The blizzard had calmed a bit.

While snow pummeled the Level One Disaster Area of Mt. Odori the entire year, it varied in severity¹⁰ depending on the time of day—the choice to fight during a calmer period had been made to accommodate Shichika, who was not used to fighting in the snow.

He sank up to his knees.

But the conditions were the same for Konayuki. In terms of height, she may have had a disadvantage (standing waist deep in the snow), but because this was her home turf, it was six in one, half-dozen in the other.¹¹

By the way, Shichika was not in his usual battle mode, shirtless and barefoot, armguards off—not even he was dumb enough to go out in the snow like that. Just yesterday, he almost died of frostbite.

He looked outfitted for a polar expedition.¹²

A little hard to move. Whatever, no big deal.

Maintaining the Suzuran, Shichika answered Konayuki.

“Hell yeah, I’m ready—but it sure is cold. Let’s get started. You good, Togame?”

“Yep.”

Standing between them, Togame (who had borrowed furs from Konayuki when she insisted they’d be much cozier than her many layers of silk) nodded slightly—and raised one hand high, serving her function as the referee. Between Triad Shrine and the Basket, the Schemer was starting to have a side career in refereeing.

Togame winked¹³ at Shichika.

Shichika winked back, to show he understood—indeed, this battle had its own

restrictions.

Beat the superhuman little girl, Konayuki. That was a given.

But on top of that, Togame had stressed to Shichika that he *must not kill Konayuki*.

“Can you do that?”

Asked this question by his owner, he couldn’t exactly answer no, but his face must have betrayed his lack of certainty.

“For basically the same reason as last month,” Togame explained. “Actually, this time the stakes are even higher. Shichika, do you remember our quandary after acquiring Sento the Legion?”

“Yeah, we had to figure out a way to send all thousand swords back to Owari. We ended up accepting Meisai’s offer...but now there’s only one sword...oh, okay.” Once Shichika had spelled it out himself, he understood. “Right, that sword’s too heavy for anyone but an Itezora...”

Konayuki was the sole surviving sheath of Soto the Twin, the last of her kind.

He must not kill her under any circumstance.

“This must be why the Old Shogun failed to take away the Twin. They could try as hard as they wanted, but a sword this heavy isn’t going anywhere, which explains why no one knows what kind of sword it is. No wretched failure like that is going to wind up in the annals.”

“Makes sense. Anyway, I’m glad it isn’t just two swords in one...but hey, why is it called the Twin? Does it have to do with how much it weighs?”

“Not that I’m aware of. If I had to say, it’s probably just the way it’s written¹⁴...in which case I might have an idea.”

“Still, Kiki Shikizaki was full of surprises. What good is a sword this heavy?”

“Notwithstanding her monstrous strength, she’s just a little girl—no need to go all out on her. Reel it in enough so that she doesn’t die or get cut up or even wounded. You’re a grown man, twenty-four years old. You can afford to go a little easy on a kid.”

This notion was fraught with the carelessness of a strategist who never actually set foot into battle—or maybe she was only showing confidence in Shichika, her sword.

The swordsman who would actually be setting foot into battle, however, was ready to do as he was told and make sure that he did not kill, cut up, or even wound the child.

But go easy on her?

He could not treat this like a game simply because she was a kid.

And yet—Shichika was careless in his own right.

Komori Maniwa, one of the Maniwa Bosses.

Ginkaku Uneri, the Lord of Gekoku Castle.

Meisai Tsuruga, the Mistress of Triad Shrine.

Kanara Azekura, the Captain of the Armored Pirates.

And countless challengers not worth mentioning—in every fight, Shichika had been the victor. Who could blame him for being a little careless toward Konayuki Itezora, half his height and less than half his age, even if she was the owner of a Mutant Blade?

But this time, he would pay a price.

For being careless.

“Fight!”

Togame dropped her hand, making the signal.

The Suzuran was a passive stance that at this point needs no explanation—Shichika would let Konayuki make the first move. A precaution against wounding her.

Dad used to do this when I was a kid.

He could afford even this reverie—Konayuki was so slow in making her first move.

“Okay, here I come!”

Without a running start, or any feints, Konayuki leapt—then came dashing through the snow, heading straight for Shichika.

Running over freshly fallen powder, carrying the heaviest sword in existence—and yet her legs barely sank halfway.

She wound up Soto the Twin, and slashed at him across the body.

Bumbling like a total amateur.

Konayuki must have got the distance wrong; the Twin missed Shichika entirely, not even grazing his hair. He saw an opening, but as he raised his hand to counterattack, he knew that it was more than strong enough to leave her with a mortal wound, and thought twice at the final second.

Instead, he shot backwards.

This is harder than I thought!

Her monstrous strength was still a menace.

Shichika felt his body move by spinal reflex.

Go easy on her, huh?

“Kyotoryu–Bara!”

He kicked his toes at Konayuki, but she leapt dramatically and flopped down—dodging the blow.

A total amateur.

Then again, she was the scion of a clan who had lasted centuries in this harsh climate—there must be something there.

Konayuki’s face slipped into view.

She was having fun. Honestly having a blast.

Like a kid playing in the snow—

“...Nkk.”

Shichika could not afford to play around. While Konayuki seemed to see her attack as playful, it could have easily left her “earthling” playmate in fatal condition.

This was the opposite, the exact opposite of his battle against Hakuhei Sabi, on Ganryu Island! From the sword, to its owner!

“Rah!”

Konayuki raised the Twin to take another swing, but Shichika saw his chance and charged at her—tripping her with his right leg and swatting at her upper body. A throw, rare in the Kyotoryu...

“Kyotoryu–Sumire!”¹⁵

He landed the move just as Konayuki put her weight onto her heels, rendering her monstrous strength immaterial. In fact, by using it against her—he sent her

tiny body flying!

“H-How about that?”

Having spent her whole life on the mountain, Konayuki had naturally acquired the ability not to sink all that much when she was walking on snow. She could close the height difference between them in that manner, but the gap was hurting Shichika, not helping him.

It's hard fighting someone bigger than you, he griped, recalling his fight with Kanara Azekura, *but it's hard fighting someone smaller than you, too!*

His throw move, the Sumire, had not worked out as planned. Just when Shichika hooked her leg, Konayuki squirmed free—his swatting hand had barely hit her. Sure enough, thanks to the shock-absorbing¹⁶ properties of the deep snow, Konayuki was acting like nothing had happened—jumping like a hare and getting back on her feet. Drawing circles in the air with Soto the Twin, with one hand.

“Heheh. This is fun, Mister Shichika.”

“...It is, huh.”

Konayuki smiled, but Shichika showed no sign of smiling back.

It was time to quit messing around and finish her off with one of his secret moves... If he dialed it back a little, he could knock her out¹⁷ without killing her.

But his awareness of her monstrous strength made it hard not to overdo it...

Whatever.

Still—an order was an order.

Frankly, if he could not so much as lift Soto the Twin, he saw no way he could be deemed a “worthy” owner (especially since he felt like a sword carrying a

sword would be a walking contradiction), but the Schemer had employed him on her Sword Hunt, and as her sword, he had to do her bidding.

How about Fatal Orchid Three, Hyakka Ryoran, which he had used on Hakuto the Whisper? But since he was dialing it back, maybe Fatal Orchid Five, Hika Rakuyo... No.

Both of them took too much time.

Above all else, he must not fall victim to her monstrous strength—thus he would counter force with speed.

He would need to use the fastest move in all the Kyotoryu, and launch from Form One, the Suzuran, into Kyoka Suigetsu...

But just when he had decided—

As though to say he'd opted too late to combat force with speed, Konayuki came at him with her next strike waving Soto the Twin.

Crap.

This made Kyoka Suigetsu less ideal—if he tried it now, he would risk killing Konayuki. But her second slash attack was looking right on target. His only choice was to dodge the vertical arc by stepping to the side, to get out of her way.

He thought this through in an instant. In other words, there was enough difference between his skill and hers for Shichika to be able to—or so it seemed.





But then—*something he hadn't thought of* happened.

He dodged the slash alright.

When Konayuki swung Soto the Twin, Shichika leapt from its path, with room to spare.

Out of its way, but then—

“...!”

The Twin—came after Shichika.

“Wha...ugh...”

Monstrous strength.

A girl with monstrous strength—Konayuki Itezora.

Having witnessed her casually toss his body on her back, and brandish Soto the Twin in one hand, when he was unable to even lift it up, Shichika thought that he had grasped the scope of Konayuki's monstrous power—but in truth, his grasp was ever so tenuous.

Thinking she was a kid—he had been careless.

The Twin was heavy, but so is any sword. This heaviness is why the Kyotoryu forsook the sword and began its tradition of the Swordless Swordsman.

But weight has obvious merits. Weight can be thrown into an attack, and combined with centrifugal force, weight has the power of a wrecking ball.¹⁸ Shichika need not doubt whether Soto the Twin, the heaviest sword in existence, had weight working in its favor.

Yet.

Konayuki Itezora did not rely on weight or centrifugal force.

She defied the laws of physics, with brute strength.

Relying purely on her monstrous strength, and using it perfectly, to full advantage¹⁹—

She thought nothing of *changing the path of her sword mid-swing*.

Thanks to her monstrous strength, the centrifugal force caused by raising the Twin and letting its weight drop was *not even a factor—Konayuki Itezora!*

Lo the Itezoras!

Veritable sheaths, of a sheathless sword!

“Whuh...whoaaaaaah!”

There was no dodging this one. Shichika crossed his arms in front of his chest—which was not a secret of the Kyotoryu, but merely a defensive reflex.

The inelegant blade of Soto the Twin.

Laid into his left arm.

It had been years since Shichika had heard the sound of his own bones breaking. The sound was swallowed by the falling snow—but without delay...

“Stop, stop!” he heard Togame crying out.

In that instant, Shichika’s scorecard—saw its first X²⁰ since they set off on the Sword Hunt.

Grand homes were built around Owari Castle, one of which had been left vacant by the Schemer when she set off on her Sword Hunt—but we will go now to a room inside another home, on the opposite side of the castle.

A woman stood in the middle of the room. As if waiting for something—

“After all, Mt. Odori in Ezo was made a Level One Disaster Area just after the Owari Bakufu was established,” she said suddenly, without any context whatsoever. “Are you aware of the real reason?”

She spoke off into the air, as if talking to herself—but a voice answered.

It came from the ceiling.

“Real reason? Is it not because it has the harshest snow in all Japan?”

“So the story goes. I’m sure that nasty woman—the Schemer, is under that impression. But that has not always been the case. Mt. Odori was written off as a Disaster Area not because of the mountain itself, but because of those who call it their ancestral home, the Itezoras...” The woman laughed sadistically. “Hence why the Old Shogun was unable to capture Soto the Twin. The reason is nothing so innocent and idiotic as the Twin being too heavy to lift.”

She spoke dismissively. From the comforts of her home in faraway Owari, this woman had grasped the special powers of the Twin, and even of the Itezoras, things which Togame the Schemer had not been able to grasp in her excursion to the place in question.

“The House of Itezora...” The voice coming from the ceiling...struck a grave tone. “What sort of people are they?”

“Forgive me, but isn’t it your job to figure that out? People say they hail from

Izumo, land of the gods, and that their ancestors were titanic deities²¹...but that sounds like hogwash to me. Either way, they're too much for a single sword to handle, even this Kyotoryu. Not in one fell swoop, or even two—I wonder what that Schemer plans to do.”

Again she laughed sadistically. “It’s just like her to do something as unpredictable as jump from Satsuma to Ezo. By now she must have heard of my resurgence in Owari. Does she fancy herself safe? What say ye?”

“I must demur.” The voice from the ceiling was graver than ever. “All I know, speaking from personal experience, is that oftentimes the Schemer has no scheme at all. She has a way of going with the flow, of going in without a plan.”

“I can see why someone of your caliber would feel that way. To be sure, she has a history of making things up as she goes along. But that is what makes her so...fearsome.²² She certainly has put me through my share of tribulations. I may not fear her—but she is fearsome.”

“What exactly...do you mean?”

“Go with the flow—we say that all the time, but how many people in this world are truly capable of *going with the flow*? Once things start going poorly, most people go against the flow, and once the flow is going their way, they take great pains to keep it that way.”

“...”

“That woman takes no pains at all. She accepts things the way they are.”

“Accepts?”²³

“Let me give you an example,” said the woman. “Imagine the heaviest sword in existence—if it was you, what would you do?”

“When you say *do...*”

“Look. In and of itself, this sword would be a wonder—distinction, excellence, whatever form they take, are wonderful. However, wouldn’t a sword like that be hard to use?”

“...”

“If only an Itezora can wield this sword, it should be useless to any other party, in which case, having it or not should make no difference. This goes beyond Soto the Twin. Think about Zetto the Leveler, Zanto the Razor, Sento the Legion, Hakuto the Whisper, Zokuto the Armor, the five swords that the Schemer has managed to capture and ship back to Owari—would you want to use any of them?”

“Uh...” The voice sounded reluctant to respond, and the woman appeared satisfied by this reaction.

“The answer is no,” she said. “An unbreakable sword? If one sword breaks, just get another. A sword that cuts through anything? Cutting through a person should be plenty. A slew of identical swords? Who needs their swords to be exactly the same? Brittle sword? Who needs one of those at all? And a sword shaped like a suit of armor? How is that even a sword...”

The woman was talking her head off.

“She thinks that having all the swords of Kiki Shikizaki will make her rule over the land, but what makes her so sure? The tide of war cannot be significantly altered by the presence of a single sword. And the venom of the blades? This idea that owning one will make you want to kill—*why else would anybody own a sword!*”

She had the most magnificent smile on her face.

“ ...”

“But this woman sees things differently. She treats the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki like they were just a bunch of swords. She sees them as a means²⁴ of furthering her career. Which to me is foolish, knowing their true value, but on the other hand—correct. That woman, like I said, accepts things basically the way they are. All this stuff about that bizarre swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki? She sees no issue there. She accepts reality at face value, and faces up to it. Which is why a person like you would think she has no plan. But were the Schemer so guileless, this would have ended when the Maniwa betrayed her—nay, it would have ended when she antagonized²⁵ me.”

“However,” said the voice in the ceiling, “don’t you think the Schemer...is in peril against the Itezoras? That boundless, monstrous strength...as you say, not even the Kyotoryu—”

“I am not unconcerned.”

The princess—used a double negative.²⁶

“And yet, I have a feeling she will pull through. We cannot have her dying now, and besides, in due time, I will come out on top of history. But regardless...”

The woman spun around.

To face a pair of swords—displayed in the alcove.²⁷

A pair of swords, yet at first glance, it was hard to tell they were that. In fact, back then, probably not a single person could tell, or even guess, what on earth they were.

But *someone from our time* would identify the pair instantly.

One was a revolver.

The other was an automatic.

Indeed, this pair of weapons should not, could not exist in this time or place—its presence was inconceivable. But it was here alright! One of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, Ento the Bead!

“As long as I have *this* at hand, I’m on the proper side of history. Which is why—we wait.”

“...”

“Unacceptable,” the woman said, “unacceptable. Unlike the Schemer, I accept absolutely nothing. Rejection is my policy. I do not even accept myself. I reject realism, reason, and reaction²⁸—resolution, restriction, and resistance,²⁹ every aspect of reality. They say that truth is stranger than fiction, and fiction shoots straighter than truth. But I don’t buy it. It only riddles beauty with its ghastly words. But the world will hear me—Princess Negative. Rejecter of all.”

Princess Negative.

Seeing her as the greatest obstacle, Togame the Schemer had tried finishing her off time and time again—and had no idea her nemesis had risen³⁰ this far.

¹ 騒動 SŌDŌ flurry (of action)

² 宿敵 SHUKUTEKI longstanding rival

³ 否定姫 HITEI HIME “Negation Princess”

⁴ 予定調和 YOTEI CHŌWA “planned accord” Japanese translation of philosopher Leibniz’s term

- ⁵ 刀身と頭身 TŌSHIN TO TŌSHIN “sword body” (portion above handle)
vs. her “head & body”
- ⁶ 選ばれし者 ERABARESHI MONO the selected/elect
- ⁷ 無双 MUSŌ “no twin”
- ⁸ 白旗を揚げる SHIROHATA WO AGERU “raise a white flag”
- ⁹ ちゃんばらごっこ CHANBARA GOKKO pretending to be swordsmen, using
e.g. sticks
- ¹⁰ 強弱 KYŌJAKU “strong (or) weak”
- ¹¹ 五分五分 GOBU GOBU “five-tenths five-tenths” an even match
- ¹² 寒冷地仕様 KANREICHI SHIYŌ “cold-terrain specs”
- ¹³ 目配せ MEKUBASE eye signal
- ¹⁴ 当て字 ATEJI transcribing a word using phonetically equivalent
characters
- ¹⁵ 堇 SUMIRE “The Violet”
- ¹⁶ 緩衝 KANSHŌ “lessen impact”
- ¹⁷ 峰打ち MINE’UCHI “strike with the spine (of the sword)” analogous to
the modern pistol whip
- ¹⁸ 破壊力 HAKAIRYOKU destructive force
- ¹⁹ 自由自在 JIYŪ JIZAI freely
- ²⁰ 黒星 KUROBOSHI “black star” denotes a loss
- ²¹ だいだら法師 DAIDARA BOCCHI a hulking, mythical monster as big as a

mountain

22 手強い TEGOWAI “strong-handed”

23 肯定 KŌTEI affirm vs. 否定 HITEI negate

24 道具 DŌGU tool

25 敵対 TEKITAI “confront as an enemy”

26 二重否定 NIJŪ HITEI “two layers of negation”

27 床の間 TOKO NO MA recessed space in a room, reserved for prized possessions

28 現実も現状も現象も GENJITSU MO GENJŌ MO GENSHŌ MO reality, situation, phenomenon too

29 限界も限定も限外も GENKAI MO GENTEI MO GENGAI MO limits, delimiting, excess too

30 台頭 TAITŌ come to prominence puns on 帯刀 TAITŌ carry a sword

CHAPTER
FOUR

KYOKEN
MANIWA



Three days passed.

Shichika's wound, his first since they had set off on the Sword Hunt, was not as bad as they had thought—no more than a simple fracture to his lower left arm. In his twenty years of training back on Haphazard Island, he had broken plenty of bones, but always let them heal on their own. This time around, they splinted his arm and held it in place with a bandage made from strips of fabric torn from one of Togame's kimonos. Naturally the wound had swollen on the first day, causing him to have a temperature, but at this point it had calmed considerably. In his experience, the bone would set in just about two weeks. Specially forged, Shichika Yasuri healed at an alarming rate.

Then, on the fourth day.

Whilst munching on nutritious gobbets of smoked rabbit, which Konayuki had told him he could help himself to while he warmed his bones up by the fire...

Shichika heard Togame say, "Sorry, okay?"

Facing the wall, without turning to Shichika.

"Huh? About what?"

"Oh, I mean, I was just thinking...that it feels like this time, it was my fault."

"..."

Four days late, she finally apologized.

There was nothing endearing about this delay.

Though omitted here, in the interests of space and in compliance with ethical guidelines, until the day before Togame had barraged Shichika with a maelstrom of verbal abuse. To offer an example that wouldn't tarnish her favorability rating—well, that'd be impossible, but she'd showered Shichika with all manner of insults, like “No sword of mine would ever lose,” and “What use do I have for a broken sword?” and “Go back to the island.” Not to mention physical abuse in equal measure.

Shichika had just sat there and taken it. He figured she had a point—he was raised better than to make excuses when he failed.

This had made it difficult for Togame to know when to stop. In terms of personality, she had a way¹ of ramping up the vitriol indefinitely, so long as the person on the receiving end did not protest. As a result, she became increasingly embarrassed about her behavior—until the fourth day.

When Togame got the nerve up (albeit facing the wall) to apologize to Shichika for the awful things she had said to him.

“Nah, it was my fault. I thought I was prepared for how strong Konayuki was, but I told myself that she was just a kid, and underestimated her.”

“I'm the one who said you could afford to go a little easy on her... It was unreasonable for me to tell you not to hurt her. I made the mistake of thinking of your strength as mine, and wound up going way off base.”

She finally turned around. Shichika was surprised to see her face flush with the color of regret.

“Then I took it out on you. I know I can't take back the things I said, but...”

“It’s okay. I lost. And my strength is your strength.”

In many ways a perseverant young man, Shichika was relatively thick-skinned when it came to criticism from Togame. As a matter of fact, so far on their journey, he had taken reamings² this bad on a daily basis. It made no sense apologizing now. In fact, he almost wished that she had reamed him out a little more this time—not because he was a masochist, but because he deserved it.

What Konayuki said to him once she’d injured him and won the battle was another thing entirely.

“Ah, ah, eek! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to! I’m so sorry, I had no idea you were so **weak**, Mister Shichika!”

“...”

At the moment, Konayuki had left the cave. She had taken Soto the Twin and gone hunting.

Saying—Mister Shichika, Miss Togame, you guys just hang out here, I’m going to fetch us some tasty rabbit, okay?

Her absence had influenced the timing of the apology.

And another thing. Meat didn’t agree with Togame. She could care less about wild rabbit, no matter how tasty. Some wild greens would have been another story.

Still, Togame could not contain her wonderment at how the girl had managed to keep herself alive on this snow-covered mountain. Although...

I was no different. Nor—is that woman.

“Actually, Togame, it may be a little late for this, but I feel like I should thank you—for noticing so quickly. That’s why I only hurt my arm.”

“Okay... Thanks for saying that.”

The second Shichika was hit by Konayuki, Togame called the fight. Perhaps prematurely—a broken arm would likely not have stymied him, and if they’d gone on fighting, things may have ended differently. But Togame doubted it, and Shichika was of the same opinion.

“If we had kept on going, I’d have busted more than my left arm. I can’t believe how strong she is...it was like my hands were tied. Like I couldn’t even see her moving...but I’m glad we did it as a match. Without you as referee, I could’ve been killed.”

Even if Konayuki possessed no such intention—a direct hit from that steel pipe³ of a katana would have been the end of him.

He started wondering if maybe Konayuki was the one who had gone easy on him.

After all—he was only an earthling.

“I broke the rules...”

“Huh?”

“Remember? Never break a sword. Protect Togame. And protect myself—I definitely failed to protect myself. I know she barely hurt me, but aren’t you worried about the future?”

“Quit blaming yourself. As it stands, I think I’ve blamed you enough...more than enough. I’m sorry,” Togame apologized again, sounding genuinely sorry.

Just because she maintained a positive perspective and accepted things the way they were did not mean nothing ever put a dent in her. On this occasion, she was particularly ashamed of making Shichika her whipping boy.

Nevertheless, she faced him with a look of resolve.

“You broke your arm, not a rule—in light of what you’ve shared of your own experiences, in a fortnight you’ll be good as new. I’ll say it again. This time, my strategy backfired.⁴ If anything’s to blame, it’s not your loyalty.”

“Thanks for that.”

After being subject to her vitriol for three days straight, Shichika had started wondering if maybe she would fire him, so this came as a huge relief.

But they could not afford to get too comfortable. Regardless of whose strategy had failed, or who was careless—they had lost.

There was no seeing beyond the fact that they had failed to capture the katana.

“Goes to show I was getting ahead of myself. Maybe a failure was exactly what a Schemer like me needed. If a winning streak goes on too long, you start to drop your guard—all things considered, I think you failed spectacularly.”

What else could Shichika do but smile wryly. “Yeah, but Togame, to be perfectly honest with you, even if you told me from the start that I could go all out—that I could *kill her if I had to*.”

“...”

“*Even if I hadn’t underestimated Konayuki*—I’m not so sure I could have beaten her. Once she realized I meant business, she’d have stopped pulling her punches—and left me in way worse shape than this.”

“You sure think highly of her. Truth is, I have a hard time seeing a difference past a certain level of strength—but she’s that good, huh? Looks like an amateur to me.”

“She’s an amateur,” Shichika declared. “The girl’s a total amateur. Her grasp of the martial arts is not even on the level of what some teenage girl might learn for self-defense. Her moves are for hunting, rather than fighting, and those two things are different—but trust me, she’s outstanding... Honestly, this is the hardest thing for me. When there’s no rhyme or reason to it, and they’re just insanely strong.”

Clever as she may be, Togame was no mind reader and could not possibly have known, but at the moment, Shichika had in mind a particular individual, somebody *he knew very well*—

Someone who never had to try, or even train—*but was the strongest person in existence*, the embodiment of talent.

And he felt the same way about Konayuki Itezora.

He regarded her that highly, and not just because she’d defeated him—if anyone was worthy, it was Konayuki and her monstrous strength.

Komori Maniwa, Ginkaku Uneri, Meisai Tsuruga, Hakuhei Sabi, Kanara Azekura...

This girl’s overwhelming innate talent differed from that of the other owners of the Twelve Possessed whom he had fought.

“Gives me the creeps,” Togame said. “In that case, I mean...if this kid is only ten or so—imagine how insanely strong the grownup Itezas must have been.” She was still unaware of the true reason the Owari Bakufu had made Mt. Odori a Level One Disaster Area, but she’d become painfully aware of the power of the Itezas. “I can’t even imagine how powerful the chief’s eldest son must have been, when the sword was his.”

“According to Konayuki, she was one of the weaker kids... No wonder they

started calling us earthlings. So, what's next, Togame?"

"Huh?"

"With you sulking for the past three days, I haven't had a chance to ask, but don't tell me that we're giving up. What about the Sword Hunt?"

"Course not... Wait, did you just say that I was sulking?"

"No"—Shichika had acquired a new special move: the lie.

Togame leered at him, but she must have truly regretted her recent behavior because she let the comment slide.

"But well, in that case, we'll need Konayuki to haul the Twin back to Owari—which means I guess I still can't kill her? Heavy as it is, it's not like we can take it from her while she's sleeping. Once my left arm heals, I might have to fight her again, to show whether I'm worthy. You can count on me to do my best, but can you try to think up some kind of a scheme? Like what we did with Sabi."

"About that, Shichika," Togame said.

In those three days—she had done more than sulk around. In addition to cursing Shichika and giving him the occasional knuckle sandwich, she had considered their next move—and worked out a scheme.

After entertaining every possibility, she had arrived at a conclusion, and once she was there, she wished that she had seen it when they got here. But the cold had gotten to her head. Everything had happened all at once, and she was too weak to keep up.

However—it wasn't too late.

While Shichika's broken arm was nothing but a sign of failure, having suffered

this kind of a defeat at this point in her six months hunting for the swords was, even without putting on a brave face, not a bad thing at all.

She had needed a reality check.⁵

“I suspect—that fighting Konayuki is no longer necessary.”

“Huh?”

Shichika was surprised to hear this. He was banking on a rematch—a showdown in the snow⁶ against Konayuki Itezora. It seemed like the only natural course of action.

Everything was a pain to him, especially incidental details, but he was by no means an uncompetitive person—in that sense, he was still a little kid.

As a swordsman, he didn’t mind losing, but he did mind leaving it at that.

“Togame... What are you talking about?”

“This is not a theory. It’s a conclusion.”

“But I need to battle Konayuki, to prove I’m worthy to hold Soto the Twin, or else we can’t capture the sword and get Konayuki to cooperate.”

“Well, about that...” Togame slowed her pace deliberately to calm him down.

“I think the girl is lying about this whole ‘worthy’ thing.”

“...Huh?”

“It’s so obvious that it barely bears mentioning. Think about it, Shichika. If anyone is fit to own Soto the Twin—it would have to be the Itezas.”

“...”

The clan chosen by Kiki Shikizaki to be the sheath—just as Komori Maniwa was able to sheathe Zetto the Leveler in his belly, the Itezas, as veritable sheaths,

were worthy owners of the Twin.

“Yeah, I thought about that.”

“I believe her that she found a certificate...though I’m not sure I would call it that. Reading it, she learned certain things that her family had never told her, regarding their responsibility to sheathe the Twin. But the ‘worthy’ bit is bogus. In my opinion.”

“But why...would she lie about that?”

“She’s *playing*.” Togame let out a heavy sigh, deeply ashamed that she had overlooked such an incredibly childish fib. “*She wanted somebody to play with...* This may not register for you, Shichika, since training was a way of life for you even at that age, but all kids, girls and boys alike, love playing samurai.”

“Playing samurai...”

This had occurred to Shichika.

In the middle of their battle, Konayuki came off like she was only playing...

Having fun—loads of fun.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that the Twin was treasured by the Itezoras. Just look at how the chief, the most powerful figure in the village, and head of what was probably its most prominent family,⁷ bequeathed it on his firstborn son. But because Konayuki was too young, they never told her—and she was unaware of the true value of Soto the Twin. I mean, she almost gave us the darn thing when we asked.”

“Yeah, she certainly isn’t moved by any fervor or sense of duty...but why make up this ‘worthy’ thing?”

“Again, she was playing around. You suggested as much yourself.” Trying her

best not to sound emotional, Togame said, “That little girl is lonely.”

“...”

“We would head home once she handed us Soto the Twin—leaving her alone here on the mountain. The kid just lost her entire family in an avalanche. She may seem cheerful to you, but I guarantee you that she wants someone to talk to.”

“So you’re saying...that she lied, *to keep us here?*”

“Kinda cute, huh? Might be hard for you to say when she broke your arm, but.”

“Yeah, well, not because of my arm, but I don’t get it. If she’s so lonely, why doesn’t she leave the mountain?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten about Ginkaku Uneri and Inaba Desert. When you’ve lived somewhere forever, the place fills up with memories. You can’t just up and leave. Also, from the way that Konayuki calls us earthlings, and knows that earthlings are comparatively weaker, the Itezoras must have interacted in some way with the villages below.”

“Yeah, and if she just went to one of those villages—”

“Must be nice to live inside your head,” interrupted Togame, as if she pitied Shichika’s sunny disposition. “What kind of a village would open its doors to a girl with her monstrous strength?”

“...So no?”

“She would be treated as an abomination.⁸ And Konayuki knows it. They may have interacted with the Itezoras, but I’m sure no more than necessary. Now that we’ve waltzed into her domain, she will do everything she can to keep us

here. Hence testing us to see if we are worthy. So long as Konayuki holds the sword, we can't go home—or so she thinks.”

“It felt like she was going easy on me, but if you're right, that would explain why. With my arm broken like this, it's going to be a while before we can have a rematch. That leaves us no choice but to stay put in this cave.”

“I doubt that her intentions were so wicked as that⁹...she seems to lack the necessary wisdom. But regardless, this makes things simple. I feel bad for Konayuki, but we're grownups, and we cannot play along with her cute little lie forever.”

“...”

“Hence why a rematch is unnecessary. I can't risk you getting injured even worse than last time. There are six other swords out there I need you to round up.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Do you want a rematch?”

“...”

If he said no, he would be lying.

However—Shichika was a sword.

A sword cannot choose who to kill.

Once it starts picking its own targets, a sword ceases to be a sword.

“I think I understand the way you feel. You may be a katana, but foremost you're a human. You do have feelings,” Togame noted, based on his previous battle against Kanara Azekura. “Still, like I was saying, to make a good lesson out of this experience, we should call a loss a loss, and leave it at that. This is in

your best interest. And honestly, in my best interest, too.”

Shichika obviously had his own thoughts on this matter, but Togame the Schemer was his owner, and her word was absolute. If she had come to a decision, he must abide.

His interests were irrelevant.

If it was in Togame’s best interest—the decision was not his to make.

“I wish we had some time to spare...or any time at all, for you to redeem your honor and clear your name and all that. But unfortunately we need to move along. Shichika, do you remember what Hohoh Maniwa said to us last month?”

“Huh? You mean about you mixing up ‘Cheerio’ and ‘Chesuto’?”

“Cheerio!”

She slugged him good. Togame, in her official capacity as Schemer, shunned both weaponry and martial artistry on principle, but over the course of her travels with Shichika, she had learned a thing or two about comic timing.

“Wrong. The stuff about Princess Negative—remember what he said?”

“Huh? Um, actually no.”

“Of course not...”

He hadn’t asked her once about it. Now she could see why. She had imputed it to tact, but tact was not a quality to be expected from Shichika, who could not even keep his mouth shut about Togame’s past.

“Since you already know about my past—allow me to explain. Princess Negative is an inspector general¹⁰ for the Owari Bakufu.”

“Inspector?”

“The exigencies of her work demand she not disclose her real name... Look, Konayuki will be back any minute, so I’ll have to give you the full details later. For now, I’ll say this woman is a menace. She seems to think I’m up to no good, and she’s come after me on multiple occasions...a couple of times, I almost wound up losing my position.”

“I’m not sure what an inspector general does...but if she works for the bakufu, and thinks you’re up to no good, doesn’t that mean she’s doing the right thing?”

“Ouch, Shichika. That hurts. I suppose I am the one who let her guard down.¹¹ But that’s not all—hmm,” Togame faltered. “At this point, I regret it, but in my efforts to suppress her, I relied a great deal on the Maniwa.”

“Ah, so that’s why Hohoh went out of his way to tell you.”

“If Princess Negative is on the move, we have no time to waste. We need to convince Konayuki to hand over the Twin as soon as possible, so we can hurry back to Owari.”

“Totally...”

Ezo had been an unexpected detour. No amount of denial¹² could alter the fact.

“Well, if the ‘worthy’ test is made up, I guess there is no reason to fight Konayuki... If what you say is true, I could beat her in a rematch and she still wouldn’t hand over Soto the Twin. But what do we do now? We can’t just call her out and make it go away.”

“Lest you forget, I am Togame the Schemer. With nothing but ingenuity, intrigue, and a silver tongue, I infiltrated the Owari command. Fruitless arguments over who said what are my hunting grounds, where I truly shine.

Wheedling a kid into or out of something is a simple enough chore.”

“You’re exuding that villainous aura again. I wish you wouldn’t.” Shichika winced, and he seemed to mean it. “Think you can pull it off? Not just convince her to hand over the Twin, but get her to haul it all the way back to Owari?”

“Of course I can. For your information, I have several ploys in mind...and one of them should do the trick. Much of it depends on her emotional reaction, but I think I can help her find peace.”

“Really.”

“We may be overstepping our bounds, but it’s too late now, we’re in too deep.¹³ We can’t leave a little girl like her alone here on this mountain and say have a nice life...”

In the wake of this uncharacteristic admission, which was fraught with palpable and complicated feeling, Togame began to share with Shichika her “ploys” for winning over Konayuki, when—

“Aaaaaghh!”

A scream came, from outside the cave.

■ ■

In her estimation of Konayuki Itezora, Togame the Schemer had been eighty-percent correct—in fact, it would be no exaggeration to conclude that she was totally correct.

The girl was lying.

Even if there hypothetically had been a prescribed method for testing who was “worthy” to receive Soto the Twin, the girl was not mature enough to be expected to adhere to family custom.

To be moved by any fervor or sense of duty.

Konayuki may have been an Itezora, but she was just a child.

She did not see things as having abstract value.

Only face value—a sword was just a sword.

Soto the Twin, the heaviest sword in existence—a blunt instrument.

Not the most convenient weapon to take hunting.

She was better off unarmed.

It cannot be said to what degree the Itezoras prized Soto the Twin, but in actuality, young Konayuki was not alone. None of the Itezoras, excepting the chief and his lineage, knew the tale behind the sword—and so to Konayuki, the sword was nothing special.

As far as she was concerned, *if someone wanted it, why not give it to them?*

And so, when she ran into these two earthlings on the mountainside—Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri...or “Miss Togame” and “Mister Shichika,” and they told her that they wanted it, Konayuki (who at that point knew nothing about the Twin) saw no trouble in running up to the village and digging it up for them.

Because she was lonely.

She wanted to see their smiling faces.

She wanted someone to talk to—and so she helped them out.

No ulterior motive. Strictly good intentions.

But when she returned to the village and beheld Soto the Twin, she thought of something.

If I let them have this.

If she let them have this, they would leave the mountain, and she would be alone again.

Think the venom of the Shikizaki blades was behind this? Preposterous¹⁴—the girl was doing what anyone would do, after a month of isolation.

One month alone.

She had left the village and been living in the cave for a whole month.

Lonely, every single day.

Then she happened upon Togame and Shichika—on the brink of disaster. But maybe it had not been happenstance. The rescue had been too convenient to write off as a coincidence.

After moving to the cave, Konayuki had busied herself with hunting, or with finding someplace more comfortable to live, coming up with any number of excuses to leave the house—as if searching for somebody.

Trying to meet somebody. Anybody.

Happenstance or not, she knew. She knew that she could never leave the mountain, not because she was a kid, but because she was an Itezora. She knew that she would never last among the earthlings.

The grownups in the village never shut up about it.

No Itezora leaves this mountain—and lives to tell the tale.

Konayuki could never leave the mountain. She was stuck there, as if bound by chains. Which is why—she waited endlessly for someone to arrive.

Always on the lookout for people climbing up the mountain.

One month—if that sounds short to you, you’re thinking like an adult. To Konayuki, who had barely been alive for ten years, it was a very long time indeed, comparable to an eternity.

But now she was so happy.

When she found Togame flopped on Shichika, almost swallowed by the snow, she did everything she could to make things cozy for her new companions.

She knew. She would never last among the earthlings.

Nevertheless—she had to show them she was *thankful for their visit*.

But she did not want for them to leave.

If they just stayed another day.

And so she lied, certain that if they *played samurai*, she would never lose against an earthling. When Konayuki used to roughhouse with the other Itezora children, she lost more often than not, but no “weakling” earthling was going to get the better of her.

And she was right.

It had not been her intention to hurt Shichika. He only broke his arm because he was a much stronger swordsman than she expected.

She felt bad. She had to admit that part of her was thrilled the two of them would not be leaving until the wound had healed, but like Togame said, she was not a wicked child.

She understood—

Things could not go on like this forever. It would be wrong to keep this up.

I'll say I'm sorry.

After just a little longer, she would say sorry.

Togame need not call her out—Konayuki planned to speak up on her own.

They would probably be mad, but she was going to apologize, and let them have Soto the Twin. So what if she was a sheath. The sword was useless to her.

She gave it a one-handed swing. She had tried to take it hunting, but it was a burden. While she had managed to pick off some rabbits, it would have been much easier barehanded.

It was as good as theirs. A token of thanks, for putting up with her.

Just a little longer.

They could humor her—a little longer. Stick around, at least until Shichika was better.

When they were gone, she would cherish the memory, and keep the loneliness at bay. She could make it alone, until somebody else climbed up the mountain.

Just stay—a little longer.

To make an awesome memory.

She would do everything she could to keep them cozy.

An awesome memory, *to replace that awful memory, and make it go away.*

“Wha...”

She was done hunting with Soto the Twin. Carrying the sword in one hand

and three¹⁵ rabbits in the other, Konayuki had trekked home to the cave where her guests were waiting—when a shadow materialized before her.

Not sneaking to hide its movements, nor creeping to hide its presence.

Forget about hiding—in other words, next thing she knew, the shadow was before her. That fast.

Leave it to the stealthy ones—to be stealthy.¹⁶

Wearing sleeveless ninja garb, body wrapped in chains.

Every inch of exposed skin—face, neck, and arms, down to the fingertips—thoroughly tattooed. Not with writing or designs, but a chaos of black lines. Tattoos.¹⁷

Probably underneath the ninja garb as well.

Long hair tied back at the neck—*her* neck.

“Hello! I’m one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa—Kyoken Maniwa!”

Smiling rabidly¹⁸—the Mad Dog moved.

¹ 彼女の性 KANOJO NO SAGA her nature not to be confused with 性 SEI gender, sex

² 罵詈雑言 BARI ZŌGEN rasher of vitriolic language

³ 金棒 KANABŌ metal rod

⁴ わたしの失策 WATASHI NO SHISSAKU my error, blunder 失 SHITSU loss/fail 策 SAKU plan

⁵ 戒め IMASHIME admonition, point of caution

- 6 雪辱戦 SETSUJOKU SEN bout against a previously victorious opponent
雪 YUKI snow
- 7 本家 HONKE “main house”
- 8 呪い子 NOROIKO “cursed child”
- 9 悪辣 AKURATSU vicious; crafty
- 10 内部監察官 NAIBU KANSATSU KAN “internal monitor”
- 11 脇の甘さ WAKI NO AMASA “easy armpits” from allowing an
opponent’s arms inside one’s own
- 12 記憶を改竄 KIOKU WO KAIZAN tamper with memory
- 13 乗りかかった船 NORIKAKATTA FUNE “a ship that one is already
boarding”
- 14 牽強付会 KENKYŌ FUKAI reading too much into things
- 15 三羽 SANWA “three wings” (counted like birds, rather than with the
usual 匹 HIKI)
- 16 しのび寄ってきた—しのび SHINOBI YOTTE KITA—SHINOBI “it snuck up—
a ninja”
- 17 刺青 IREZUMI “pierced (needled) blue”
- 18 凶暴 KYŌBŌ savage (“rabidly” based on 狂犬病 KYŌKEN BYŌ “mad
dog disease” = rabies)

CHAPTER FIVE
HIKA RAKUYO

■ ■

“Aaaaaghh!”

When they heard the scream, Shichika and Togame dashed out of the cave and into the blowing snow without realizing what they were doing. For an instant they were blinded by the endless white, but today the snow was not so bad that they could not see a foot in front of them.

They saw Konayuki Itezora from behind.

Holding Soto the Twin in her left hand. At her feet, and disappearing in the falling snow, were the rabbits. Her quarry, but not our focus.

Our focus is the woman clutching her stomach and crouched before Konayuki, someone neither Shichika nor Togame recognized.

But they recognized the telltale ninja garb.

Togame’s erstwhile betrayers, now supposedly allies—

“A M-Maniwac!” yelled Shichika.

Konayuki turned around and gave him a puzzled look, as if an explanation was in order.

“Umm, is she...a friend of yours?”

“Uh, no...”

“She jumped on me, yelling stuff I couldn’t understand, so I may have hit her

back, like as a reflex.”

“...”

Without explaining things to Konayuki—what could they say about a stranger—Shichika and Togame turned their gaze upon the crouching woman, who appeared to be in pain.

She was undoubtedly a member of the Maniwa—but she had her own thing going on. Every inch of exposed skin was covered in tattoos, black lines that could not be called patterns or designs.

“She didn’t introduce herself?” Togame asked Konayuki. Her tone was serious. “She must have given her name.”

“Umm, let’s see...” Konayuki spun her hand like she was trying to remember. “Okay, she said something about Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa... I think it was Kyoken?”

“Hmm. I see.”

Togame had heard the name before. While they had never met, she knew that Kyoken was a heavyweight¹ even among the Twelve Bosses—but not that she was a woman. The Schemer found it a little surprising that the Maniwa had women in their uppermost ranks.

But what was Kyoken Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses, doing here—why did she come? When they had made a deal, the month before...

“Serves me right for striking a deal with ninjas, even if I did have my suspicions.” Togame spat the words out, leveling a frigid stare on the woman. “In any case, getting beaten at her own game like this? Such bad form. Konayuki, did she try something weird on you?”

“Yeah, she was running around in circles like a total maniac, but when I hit her, she calmed down.”

Course she did, Shichika told himself. This ninja seemed to pride herself on speed, but she’d made the mistake of trying to use it to counter strength, like he had four days earlier. Konayuki Itezora’s monstrous strength could not be stopped so easily.

A strength immune to speed—the more you ponder it, the scarier it sounds.

“Well, I have to give her credit for climbing up here all alone—leave it to the Maniwa. Well now, what can Hohoh Maniwa do to make this up to me.”

“Getting whooped the second she showed up reminds me of Shirasagi Maniwa...”

“Sh-Shira...”

The woman twitched, as if reacting to the name.

Kyoken Maniwa looked up, glaring at Shichika—and Togame.

No gaze could have been more intense, and it seemed to pierce their very beings.

“Shirasagi... Komori... Kuizame... Chocho... Mitsubachi... Kamakiri!”

“...?”

“Shirasagi... Komori... Kuizame... Chocho... Mitsubachi... Kamakiri... Shirasagi... Komori... Kuizame... Chocho... Mitsubachi... Kamakiri... Shirasagi... Komori... Kuizame... Chocho... Mitsubachi... Kamakiri!”

Grumbling, Kyoken attempted to sit up. But the pain in her stomach proved too extreme, and she toppled forward into the snow.

“Schemer babe—you’ve made a real game out of murdering my friends,” she

said, face planted in the snow. “Because of you, the Maniwa are in deep trouble.”

“What of it?”

Togame was not remotely bothered by Kyoken’s words, or at least, showed no sign of being bothered.

“You think I want to listen to a ninja whine? What right have you to complain, when you’re the ones who betrayed me? Or do you want to hear me say, *If you hadn’t betrayed me, this never would have happened—*”

“Gahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Kyoken, on the other hand, appeared immensely bothered by Togame’s words—in fact, it whipped her into action. She sprang to her feet.

Standing up, she was extraordinarily tall.

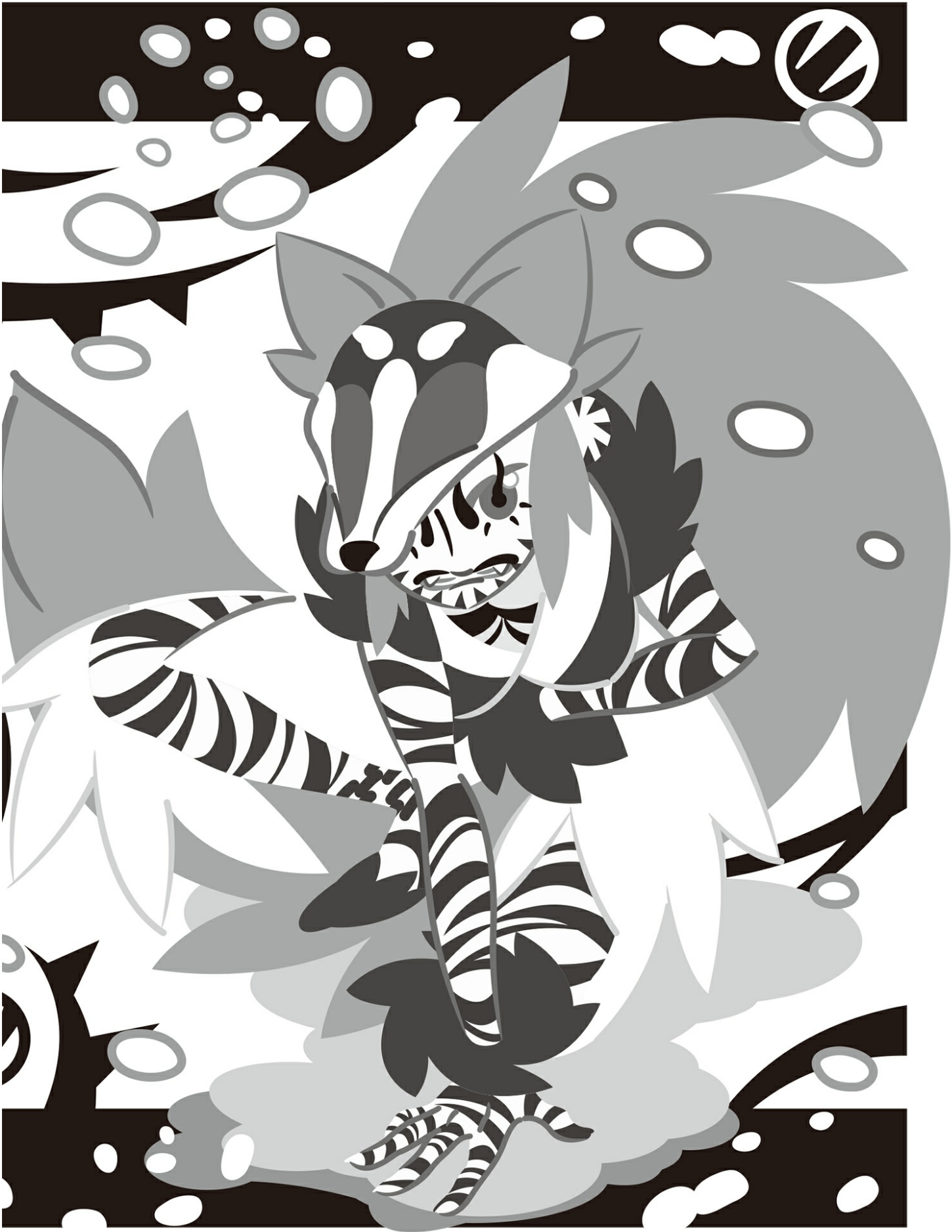
She would have made a good opponent for the late Meisai Tsuruga.

“Enough, enough, enough, enough—I’m gonna kill you! Mess with my friends, you mess with me. To hell with the alliance. You’re gonna die die die die die die die die—I’m gonna rip you to shreds!”

“Not your basic ninja,” said Togame, taken aback. “You sure don’t disguise your emotions.”

Out of all of the Twelve Bosses, Shichika had only had a hand in killing one of them, Komori. It would be fair to say that he and Togame were not responsible for murdering the other five ninjas Kyoken named (since they had never met Chocho, Mitsubachi, or Kamakiri)—but when Togame made her deal with Hohoh, she had taken credit for the deaths of Shirasagi and Kuizame. There was no use splitting hairs² with Kyoken.





At this point, there was no reasoning with her.

Kyoken blamed Togame for embroiling the Maniwa in the Sword Hunt in the first place. As far as the ninja was concerned, Togame started it³ when she dragged the Maniwa into it.

“She sure knows how to make a first impression, but how does she expect to kill me in the state she’s in? Things are looking less than stellar⁴ for this lady.”

“I’ll say,” Shichika chimed in. “How can the Maniwa have such crummy timing? Hey, Kyoken, don’t be sad. This girl here beat me too.”

A menace, and still so young. Able to vanquish not only the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, but one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa in a single blow—the Itezoras were unbelievable. Shichika could chalk it up to good luck that a rematch was not looking to be necessary.

Speaking of good luck, Shichika was fortunate that Kyoken got to Konayuki first.

His left arm was broken. He’d just as soon not fight a Maniwa Boss in that state.

“Heh...”

Kyoken, however—laughed at Shichika’s remark.

“Is that so. Thanks for the tip.”

“...?”

“I was unsure...if this body could defeat the Kyotoryu—I really couldn’t say. *With a body built for speed...*”

Rambling senselessly, as if talking to herself, Kyoken reached out her hand to Konayuki, who stood before her.

This did not seem like an attack.

Her hand floated, like she was reaching for help.

“Huh? What’s wrong...”

With the hand that was not holding Soto the Twin, Konayuki instinctively took the offered hand, in her youthful goodness—Shichika, and Togame too, failed to see what was coming, even then. They thought Konayuki had things under control. How could a handshake from Kyoken change things?

But here, things changed.

Kyoken's hand squeezed ever so slightly—by reflex, Konayuki nearly crushed it in her own. A reflex issuing from amorphous horror, only too late.

Her monstrous strength didn't kick in soon enough.

“Maniwa Ninpo—Foaming Mouth.”⁵

As she said this, the tattoos all over her body—*started moving*, in and of themselves, like living things. Crawling all over Kyoken's body, and from her left hand onto Konayuki's.

Then all over Konayuki's body.

"Ah, Ahh!"

"Ah, Ahh!"

Kyoken and Konayuki howled the same howl.

Bellowed the same.

Crying out—as if resonating.

Meanwhile, the tattoos kept crawling, spilling off of Kyoken onto Konayuki.

“Wh-What’s that...”

“N-Ninjas...”

Shichika and Togame grasped that something bad was happening, but things had escalated out of hand—there was nothing either of them could do. No choice but to watch this thing play out, not moving an inch until it was over.

Before long, it was.

Before long, the tattoos had completely migrated off Kyoken and onto Konayuki.

Kyoken Maniwa, or the body that had held her until now, collapsed like a cast-off skin.

Then, Konayuki Itezora turned around—turned her body, tattooed head to toe.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Togame, Mister Shichika.”

The voice, too—had been Konayuki’s.

Yet no vestige of her naïveté or innocence remained.

Her simple, artless nature was gone without a trace.

“Hello, once again! I’m one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa—Kyoken Maniwa!”

Only the smile, so rabid and indelicate, as if it had been sliced off the old Kyoken Maniwa, was pasted unchanged onto her new face.

“Look, Hohoh—as Captain of the Beast Unit, this is embarrassing for me to admit, but to be honest, I don’t get what’s going on with Kyoken’s ninpo.”

Even over the fallen snow, Kauso was sprinting fast as ever, and Hohoh was right beside him. They had made it to Ezo’s Mt. Odori, the Level One Disaster Area.

“Don’t you two go way back?” asked Kauso. “Now’s a great time to fill me in.”

“I wouldn’t say that she and I do—but she certainly goes way back herself,” Hohoh answered calmly. “Hence why they call her ‘The Dogged Scourge’⁶—on account of her persistent presence.”

“Persistent presence?”⁷

“Given your own powers, the basic concept should be easy to grasp... Your ninpo and hers are two sides of the same coin. Persistent presence. Kyoken Maniwa, the individual, evidently died ages ago. There’s no way of confirming whether this is true, but they say she was one of the founding ninjas of Maniwa Village.”

“Wow, I had no idea. Keheheh,” Kauso laughed mirthfully. “She should have told me. How heartless⁸ of her.”

“Her persistent presence has given her a complex. She’s ashamed to live forever—silly as it sounds. But this makes her doubly concerned for the survival of her comrades. Which for a ninja is a problem.”

“Is this persistent presence what lets her travel freely, from one body to another? What an insanely useful trick.”

“Unfortunately, she can’t be said to travel freely. The host must be a woman—meaning she could never send her spirit into you or me. The only other

one of the Twelve Bosses she could populate is Oshidori.”

“Whoa...news to me. Kyoken is full of secrets. Gotta say though, I’m jealous she can take over other people’s bodies. Now that you mention it, her ninpo is the exact opposite of mine.”

“True, but no ninpo is more perfect for the Sword Hunt than your own. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. But one thing’s for sure...the horror of her Foaming Mouth is indescribable.”

“Yeah. Komori could mimic people with his Body Melt, but he had to have a model—usurping is a different story. I guess the biggest difference is how Kyoken usurps *even their memories*... Her ninpo truly is the opposite of mine.”

“But what’s your take, Kawauso? Does Kyoken plan to take over the Schemer?”

“Hard to say—usurping her memories would certainly give us a leg up in the Sword Hunt... But Hohoh, wouldn’t that mess up your plans?”

“It would indeed. I hope to let her get her way a little longer—but as you know, taking over the Schemer would be enfeebling. The woman’s physical ability is nil, no more than child’s play—Kyoken would need to kill the Kyotoryu before she takes over the Schemer... But what’s your take, Kawauso?” the Phoenix repeated his question verbatim. “Despite being a novice, Shichika Yasuri made short change of Komori, late of the Beast Unit—Komori Maniwa, master of the Body Melt. Do you think that Kyoken, *in her current state*, could take down the Kyotoryu?”

Kawauso took a second to respond. “...Probably not. She picked the body that she’s in right now for her last job, where she had to be as fast as possible. I doubt she had a chance to change bodies along the way.”

“Hmm, in that case, we might be looking at the worst-case scenario, where Kyoken is beaten by the Kyotoryu, and the alliance falls apart—no, actually...” The worst case, which they should fear above all else: “We cannot fixate on Kyoken and forget about the owner of Soto the Twin... If whoever owns it is a woman, there’s *another possibility*.”

“Right, the owner—according to Penguin, it’s one of those monsters, the Itezoras.”

“If Penguin said it, then it must be true. Soto the Twin, wielded by the Itezoras, whose monstrous strength made even the heaviest sword imaginable feel balanced...”

“We could really use Chocho right about now. His Harlequin Butterfly could make light of absolutely any weight. In that case, should we take that route? If Kyoken doesn’t take over one of the Itezoras, whether they have the Twin or not, she can’t claim the sword for the Maniwa. But yeah, once she does, the alliance is over...”

“No matter the outcome, the Maniwa will not come away unscathed. But regardless, Kawauso—at this point, catching Kyoken is the most that we can hope to do.”

“Right. Although by now, it may be too late...”

On that note, the two ninjas disappeared into the snow. Yet all their running was in vain, because the action had spun out of control.

All that remained was the final curtain.

“Keh keh keh... Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Laughing as loud as her voice allowed, Kyoken Maniwa, embodying Konayuki Itezora, swung Soto the Twin—lopping the head clean off her old body.

“Wow, wow, wow! I can feel the strength in every single muscle. This body is too cool! Cooler than anybody that I’ve ever used—what did she say, Itezora? I don’t know them, but this is amazing!”

As though she had forgotten about Shichika and Togame, and the grudge she held against them for murdering her comrades, Kyoken was bowled over⁹ by how well Konayuki Itezora’s body performed.

She was overwhelmed. One might even call her overawed—since Kyoken was essentially a disembodied ghost, to use a tired expression, a superlative body meant the world to her persistent presence.

Especially a body as superlative as *this one*.

Testing her new abilities, she turned on the body that had only just been hers—and bashed it apart.

“Aha, aha, aha, aha, aha, aha—wow, wow, wow, wow! Amazing, so amazing—this thing can do anything! I’ve stumbled on—the ideal body! She’s only just a kid?! I can only imagine what she’ll be like when she’s older.”

“Hey, Togame...” Keeping Kyoken in his field of vision as she furiously hacked away at her cast-off body, Shichika addressed his owner, who was standing right beside him, watching the same thing. “Just checking, but it’s okay to kill *her*, right?”

“ ...”

Togame hesitated to respond, but she did not need Shichika to prompt her—she had come to a decision on her own.

Foaming Mouth. The phenomenon spoke for itself—there was no reason to indulge Kyoken and demand an explanation.

A ninpo that usurps bodies... It made no sense, but that was the gist.

Kyoken had stolen the show.

Togame’s scheme was ruined. She had no choice but to accept the brutal fact.

Soto the Twin could only be wielded, or so much as lifted, by an Itezora, and the body of their sole survivor had been taken over by the Maniwa—quite literally, she was at a loss. This was anything but a stalemate.¹⁰

In which case—they had to put down Kyoken Maniwa, to keep this Mutant Blade of Kiki Shikizaki from being stolen by the Maniwa. Konayuki Itezora’s body needed to be annihilated.

It was decided.

“Shichika.”

“What.”

“Can you kill her?”

“Yeah. I mean, it might be harder with my arm like this, but who knows if I could’ve beaten her even at my best? Makes no difference.”

“ ...”

Togame had obviously not been asking if his left arm was okay.

Konayuki Itezora was not the enemy; when they were incapacitated on the

snowy mountainside, she had rescued them, and saved their lives. What Togame had been asking Shichika was whether, without flinching,¹¹ he could murder Konayuki Itezora, when she had cared for them inside her humble cave for three whole days—even if her kindness had been premised on a lie, even if somebody else now occupied her body.

But Shichika had answered without flinching.

Not comprehending why she asked. No—unable to comprehend.

A sword does not choose who to kill...

“Understood,” said Togame, with resolve. “It isn’t okay to kill her. I order you to kill her. Murder her.”

For Konayuki’s sake—but she did not voice those words. They simply felt too hollow.

While the two of them conversed, Kyoken Maniwa mashed her old body into a pulp, scattering the pieces irretrievably into the snow.

Even now—she was laughing.

“Amazing, so amazing. What would be even more amazing is if I ran up to the Itezora village and took over the body of a full-grown woman. Hm? Huh, what? The Itezoras...were wiped out? A month ago?”

Kyoken finally stopped hacking and spun her hand like she was trying to remember something...just like Konayuki earlier.

Togame was shocked to discover that Kyoken could *even usurp memories*. Shichika recalled the ninpo used by Komori Maniwa, the Body Melt. Komori himself had confessed that his ninpo could not replicate a person’s brains—but not so for the Foaming Mouth.

Could this be...more dangerous than the Body Melt?

“Huh, what the...is this memory for real?”

With that—Kyoken’s entire visage changed.

“What happened? *What could possibly*—have caused this? What an absolute mess, everything is gone¹²...” Her deep intoxication with the capabilities of Konayuki, and the entire Itezora Clan, clearing—she went pale and continued talking to herself. “Wh-What happened? What could have caused this? The village, the Itezoras—”

“Hey,” Shichika yelled at Kyoken in a fairly stern voice, unable to put up with it, and running low on patience. “Enough with the gobbledygook. You want a piece of me? Let’s do this—but watch out, Kyoken. Don’t even think of taking over my body.”

“Whatever,” Kyoken mumbled, ignoring Shichika for the time being. “I’ll figure this out later, Kawauso or Penguin could get me an answer easy. Wait, what? Did you just say, ‘Don’t even think of taking over my body’? No thanks, honey. I can’t take over men.”

“Huh? You can’t?”

“Men and women have fundamentally different genetic¹³ makeups...not like you would understand a thing like that. If this memory serves me correctly, you’re pretty stupid.”

“That’s what I seem like to a ten-year-old girl?”

It was enough to hurt Shichika’s feelings—but there was no time for that.

He took position—Form One, the Suzuran, the same as four days earlier.

His left arm was strong enough to do the form, and probably even strong

enough to make a hit. Blocking was another story, but so long as he avoided direct contact with the injury, he could operate as normal.

Here we go again.

Up against Konayuki's monstrous strength, blocking was essentially meaningless. As with Ginkaku Uneri, he had to base his fighting style on evasion, not defense.

"Okay, here I come—Shirasagi, Komori, Kuizame, Chocho, Mitsubachi, Kamakiri, I'm sending the enemy your way. Gulp down whatever's left!"

Waving Soto the Twin, Kyoken headed straight for Shichika. Put into words, the motion, just like Shichika's form, was identical to four days ago—yet the execution, both individually and as an organized whole, had altered beyond all recognition.

Not like a total amateur, or any amateur at all, but like an expert, like a ninja.

"Here's a little secret for ya, Kyotoryu—I don't just usurp memories, I inherit them! Over the course of my existence, I've taken over two thousand different bodies, the great majority of whom were woman warriors of the highest stripe! No matter how long you've been training, I have several thousand times more *experience!*"

"...Nkk."

I've only been training for twenty years! And probably only been in twenty battles!

Lamenting in his heart—Shichika naturally shielded his left arm as he prepared for Kyoka Suigetsu, the secret move playing off Form One, the Suzuran. If the strategy had failed on a total amateur like Konayuki, it was bound to fail on a seasoned veteran such as Kyoken, but Shichika could not think of any other way

to counter Konayuki's monstrous strength.

Hmph.

Before he launched into the move, however, *he noticed something*. And no sooner did he notice than he abandoned the secret move, opting instead to block Kyoken's pitiless assault as best he could.

Tumbling over the snow, he put some space between himself and Kyoken.

"Huh? What, running off before we even start? You're a disgrace—and you call yourself a swordsman. Don't make me laugh, what do you think you're doing?"

Brandishing Soto the Twin in one hand, Kyoken took her time approaching Shichika. She was not about to rush after him in hot pursuit; she'd much rather enjoy her sweet revenge and the wonder that was Konayuki's body.

Honest to a fault,¹⁴ Shichika answered the ninja's rhetorical question. "Well, something just occurred to me. I figured maybe I should check in first..."

"Huh?" Kyoken grimaced with annoyance at his flippant tone, displaying an emotional intensity that did not befit a ninja.

Or perhaps this emotional intensity motivated her persistent presence and allowed her to live indefinitely—without cease, without exit, without ceasing to exist.¹⁵

Whatever her real wish.

"Check in? Please! How about I check in with your corpse, blockhead."¹⁶

Pounding the snow in her approach with all the monstrous strength you would expect from Konayuki, this time Kyoken tried a sideswipe—and delivered a blow whose force was off the charts.

A direct hit would have torn Shichika in half. However—

“If I do this...and then do that...”

Not a direct hit? That’s called whiffing.

Pivoting off his back foot, Shichika spun his body, dodging the sideswipe from Soto the Twin with the precision of intermeshing gears. He had to turn his back on Kyoken for a second, but while she was recovering from the miss, he came around on the momentum of the spin—and drove the blade of his foot into the side of her head.

His foot nailed her, at the most ideal angle possible.

A roundhouse, off a single spin.

Behold—the Ume¹⁷ of the Kyotoryu.

“Ugh, uh, oh...”

Standing on the snow, Kyoken was unable to keep her footing—and in this case, that was just as well. Her body plowed into the snow.

His *hunch* confirmed, Shichika declined to go in for another hit, and put some space between them once more.

Togame was watching all this with a blank gaze. In fact, she could not believe her own eyes. Shichika had already lost once to Konayuki, but on top of that, his left arm was broken; his opponent’s memory had been overwritten by her host, refining her every movement and making circumstances even harder than they had been when he lost; and yet his kick had been delivered with aplomb. Unlike the Sumire, which he had used the other day, the Ume had significantly weakened Kyoken—or Konayuki!

“Wh-What’s going on here, Shichika...”

Had the stipulation against killing her been that much of an impairment? No,

that didn't seem to be the case—if anything, this last move of his, the Ume, made it look like he was holding back.

“Okay, I'm not sure why, but ever since she took over Konayuki, *I see her movements*,” explained Shichika. “I can see all of the movements I couldn't see her make four days ago.”

Awkward and intuitive, his words did not immediately register for Kyoken, but Togame understood him instantly.

It clicked—Shichika had not lost because of Konayuki's monstrous strength.

True, the girl's wondrous strength had played a role in his defeat, but in the end it had been incidental.

The true reason was that when it came to combat, she was a *total amateur*.

Call them moves, or maybe movements.¹⁸ Perhaps forms—or formations.

On a grander scale, one might even call them strategies, or stratagems—but they all involve the fundamental *moves* of battle.

If they do that, you do this; if they try that, you try this; if they block that, hit them with this; dodge this, this, and this using this, this, and this—if you try going this way, here's what happens, but if you mess that up, they'll get you with this. The fact of the matter is, when people fight each other, there are only so many ways things can go.

Thrust, ward, spar, parry...the possibilities are limited. And therefore—it stands to reason that the number of time-tested and certifiably effective strategies is even lower.

And thus the moves and movements get established.

Not even the Kyotoryu, confined to the same island for twenty years, and

nearly written off by history, would prove an absolute exception. Its strategies were based on certain precepts, and these were not so different from what is found in other schools. Whether handling a sword or empty-handed, whether a ninja or anything else, no one who trains for combat can possibly remain uninfluenced by these precepts.

Which is why fighting is all about reading your opponent. Always thinking: one, two, three moves ahead, and inevitably adapting as things progress. Since forms comprise learnable moves, reading your opponent is not the hard part—but once you start reading each other, another layer of strategy emerges. Feints, new precepts, precepts contradicting other precepts—both consciously and unconsciously, even members of the same school fight this way.

Despite his minimal experience, Shichika had survived the precipitous battles thus far thanks to twenty years of constant drilling in the precepts of combat.

Consider how the quickdraw iainuki of Ginkaku Uneri relied strictly on a single form—which Shichika countered with the kaleidoscopic footwork of the Kakitsubata. Once he could see his opponent, he was victorious.





He won because he saw through his opponent—and yet.

Some opponents cannot be read. Any effort of analysis is meaningless, even counterproductive, and this had been true of Konayuki Itezora.

Distracted by her monstrous strength, he misread her entirely.

She was a total amateur, oblivious to moves or movements—and he had gone and tried to read her.

When you think about it, what could be more meaningless? Taking it upon himself to read into things, to read between the lines, he'd been taken down—by himself.

The moves of an amateur are lost on a veteran.

When it seemed like she had nabbed him, she misjudged their distance and missed—she dodged his kicks far too dramatically—when he tried a throw, she just plopped over—and to cap it all off, she changed the path of her sword mid-swing...

Thanks to those amateurish moves, Shichika found her impossible to read.

They fell outside the precepts of his school.

In the realm of combat, her moves were nonexistent, even alien.

The Kyotoryu was designed for fighting swordsmen. Ninjas, former brigands, pirates, and the like was one thing—but regular people fell outside its purview.

Reason being, they were *unreadable*. Meaning their moves were *invisible*.

The gap in skill between Shichika and Konayuki Itezora had been so vast, it had thrown everything off, like when the cogs jam in a gearworks.

But now, he could see.

Now that the body of Konayuki Itezora held the memories and knowledge of a seasoned veteran and expert assassin, Kyoken Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the dastardly Maniwa Clan—and the experience of several thousand former hosts—he could see her.

Now that she was packed to the gills with precepts.

Visually and spiritually, he could see her every move, without a single blind spot. Once the total amateur became a veteran, the cogs began to whir.

“...Gahhh!”

Kyoken realized now, but it was too late. Searching Konayuki’s memory, she had surmised *the way* the girl had beaten Shichika.

In retrospect—Kyoken had been hit by Konayuki *for the same reason*. Lightning fast, she had expected to play cat and mouse¹⁹ with Konayuki but was knocked down by her monstrous strength—because the gears had jammed!

Yet this realization would not do her any good. There was no measure she could take.

Nothing is harder for a veteran than posing as a total amateur; the precepts become a physical reflex, no longer answering to the mind. No matter how you feign to be unschooled, your body springs to life, and the body of a would-be amateur comes alive!

Something else also—shocked Kyoken.

Her precepts were rooted in experience and based upon the memories of thousands of other warriors—this was still true, and she had put them into action with the monstrous strength of Konayuki Itezora, the fearsome Itezoras.

But Shichika had *brushed her off*.

It was clear once she had fallen that he had gone easy on her with the Ume. Poised as he was, he could easily have snapped her head off of her spine.

Check in, he'd said. How could he afford that, in the middle of a battle?

"...nkk!"

Back on Haphazard Island, when Shichika had faced off against Komori Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses and, like Kyoken, a member of the Beast Unit, he had been victorious by virtue of his lack of experience.

This time, as similar as it may seem—it was the opposite.

The implications were entirely different.

Shichika had lost to Konayuki Itezora because of his enormous advantage, and now, thanks to that gap narrowing *adequately*, he was overwhelming Kyoken Maniwa!

His fears had been entirely unfounded. The injury to his left arm—was not an issue!

In his six months on the Sword Hunt, during which he had “probably only been in twenty battles,” he had boosted his ability to the point where he could hold his own against a ninja ranked among the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa.

“Ugh, urrr...”

“...?”

Despite her mood swings—Kyoken Maniwa was still a ninja. Glaring at Shichika, who seemed to be the only person left who was a little confused, she realized that she could not beat the Swordless Swordsman. Not with her ninpo...

“Nghhhh.”

Groaning, Kyoken looked toward Togame.

The Schemer stared back at her with frigid eyes and seized the reins. “Shichika, about your orders,” she said as though Kyoken were not even there. “If that woman usurps my body, kill me without delay. As savagely as possible.”

“Got it,” assented Shichika, as readily as ever.

During the exchange, Kyoken had eyeballed the distance between her and Togame, but now she gnashed her teeth. Togame drove the point home.

“Taking a hostage won’t work against my sword—and anyway, I’m about as strong as shoji paper. Trust me. I could die just from tripping and falling. I’d lose in a fight against a rabbit.”

“...Urk.”

“If I were you, I’d bet against the odds and try to battle Shichika the way you are...but I have no obligation to dispense advice to backstabbers who sabotage alliances. If you want my body, then be my guest—”

“But not if you’re torn to smithereens.”

Shichika finished Togame’s sentence—and took position.

This time, it was Kyotoryu Form Five: the Yorugao.²⁰

Straddling his legs shoulder width apart, hands relaxed and open, and poised in front of his chest, with elbows bent—somewhat aggressively for an idle stance, his body appeared ever so slightly to lean forward, allowing him to keep a steady footing in the unfamiliar snow.

“Nkk... Gahhhhhhhhhhh! I’m done listening to your yapping. You killed my friends! You killed my friends! You...pet dog!”

Fuming, Kyoken dragged herself to her feet.

“Houndstooth!”²¹

She pounced—coming helter-skelter after Shichika.

Soto the Twin, the heaviest katana in existence.

That roughhewn and inelegant sword of stone.

Shaped the same at both ends, ambiguous, with no obvious head or tail, and hence the Twin, the sword allowed perversely for the handle, not the blade, to hit the enemy. By switching your grip and holding it at the other end with both your hands, you could batter your opponent with the hilt—a knockout move, up close and personal...

But this, too, fell under a precept.

Nothing unconventional—the whole move was predictable. Maybe not six months ago, but in his current state, Shichika could handle it no problem.

He launched from Form Five into Fatal Orchid Five. Up against Konayuki, he’d feared that he lacked the time for this secret move, but now!

“Kyotoryu—Hika Rakuyo!”²²

Shichika thrust out both his open hands at once and hammered down on Kyoken—Konayuki—not slapping so much as cuffing her in the shoulders of her tiny body.

The sidelong blows, from left and right, shook her frame.

Hika Rakuyo.

Playing off Form Five, the Yorugao, this secret move could be described as the antithesis of Ryuryoku Kako, the secret move playing off Form Four that Shichika had used the month before against Kanara Azekura.

If Fatal Orchid Four, Ryuryoku Kako, transmits the impact, ravaging the insides, not the outsides—Fatal Orchid Five, Hika Rakuyo, cracks through the shell without harming its interior.

The closest the Kyotoryu had to a sheathed attack.²³

By cuffing opponents on both their shoulders simultaneously, the blow is radiated over their entire body surface—a fatal shockwave to their mortal coil. To put it simply, the trauma spreads over their skin. The result can easily be lethal—at full force, the move can mow down an opponent just as well as any of the six other secret moves—but by dialing it back, a single blow (or technically, a dual combo) can rattle opponents so completely as to render them unfit for battle. Of the seven Fatal Orchids of the Kyotoryu, this was the only one that could stay a foe.

So Shichika dialed it back.

But not because he was held back—Hika Rakuyo.

Cracking the shell without harming its interior.

The trauma spreads over the surface, *radiating over every inch of skin*.

“Her tattoos,” said Togame—observing Kyoken Maniwa, who had fallen on her back. “*They’re disappearing...*”

Kyoken’s hallmark tattoos, which she had transferred onto Konayuki’s body

from the one she had presently chopped to bits, faded away...and soon were indiscernible.

Disappearing.

Kyoken Maniwa, said to be among the founding ninjas of Maniwa Village, a persistent presence who had usurped thousands of bodies and roamed this world for centuries—

It was she who disappeared.

Leaving behind the body of Konayuki Itezora.

“Shichika... What is this?”

“Hmm. I guess by hitting *only her tattoos*, I took down Kyoken without killing Konayuki.”

The girl’s expression shed its treachery—becoming placid.

Naive and innocent.

Simple and artless—the face of a child, around ten or so.

No longer possessed, in more ways than one.

“I mean, it only worked because I got the upper hand. If I’d been unable to see her like when I fought the actual Konayuki, it would’ve been impossible, and either way, Hika Rakuyo is finicky, I wasn’t sure if I could do it with my left arm broken...but seems like it worked great. Awesome. Now we just have to ask Konayuki to bring the Twin back to Owari, right?”

“Right...” Togame nodded in answer to his question. “Exactly, well done, Shichika.”

She was paying Shichika a compliment, but inside she was conflicted.

He had done the right thing. Banishing Kyoken's persistent presence while leaving Konayuki Itezora unscathed was the best imaginable outcome. That said, there had been no guarantee that Hika Rakuyo could take down Kyoken Maniwa—things truly had gone as well as possible.

Yet this was not the problem.

Togame had ordered the katana to "kill her."

But Shichika had disobeyed—by not killing Konayuki Itezora.

This was the first time he had disobeyed her in the six months of their journey.

Deciding not to kill her, on his own.

Her sword.

It didn't mean he had been weighed down by compassion... He was probably stuck on the earlier version of her order: they needed for Konayuki to survive, so she could carry Soto the Twin back to Owari. And if Hika Rakuyo had not gone according to plan, Shichika would have simply felled²⁴ both Kyoken Maniwa and Konayuki Itezora with a single, ruthless strike.

That summed it up. But this was—the second time.

If you included Kanara Azekura from the month before, this was the second owner of a Mutant Blade whom he hadn't killed, though with Azekura, Shichika had done exactly what Togame ordered him to do.

This time, he did the opposite.

"..."

Kyotoryu, the katana incarnate.

He was the Kyotoryu, but foremost, he was human.

Togame had tried to help him see this—to give him an agenda, as a human being and not a sword. Otherwise, they would face an impasse before long.

But how was that playing out? Togame was starting to feel uneasy.

Taking a hostage won't work against my sword, she'd told Kyoken, but now she wondered...if the ninja had usurped Togame's form, would he have followed his orders? Would he have killed her?

As readily—as he had answered?

Have I fouled up the blade of my own sword, over the past two months? Simply because I, as its owner, couldn't handle the katana?

“...Cheerio.”

Bop, Togame the Schemer punched Shichika in the stomach.

A soft fist, with no energy behind it. It did make Shichika look her way—but at that moment.

“We may be too late after all,” a voice came from the mountainside.

Upon hearing it, Togame reflexively hid behind Shichika, while he leaned forward to protect her—and to peer ahead.

In the snow...nay, slipping between the snow, were two shadows.

Sleeveless ninja garb, chains wrapped around their bodies.

Maniwa Ninjas!

And one of the two shadows was familiar—effectively the head of the Twelve Bosses, they had chanced to meet in Satsuma.

“Hohoh Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Clan.”

“And Kauso Maniwa, likewise one of the Twelve Bosses.”

The ninja beside Hohoh sent them a friendly²⁵ wave. This did not enthuse Togame, who responded, still hiding behind Shichika, in a voice teeming with anger.

“You have some nerve to look me in the eye, Hohoh. And you—Kawauso.”

The latter, undaunted, might as well have been whistling. “Whoa, don’t look at me like that, Togame. Not after all that we’ve accomplished.”

“Silence!”

Togame was irate. This was Shichika’s first in-person encounter with Kawauso Maniwa, as it had been with Kyoken, but apparently she had a history with him, and it would seem that she did not look very fondly on their work together.

Shichika shrugged—*here we go again*.

While Togame kept her cool when they encountered Kyoken, who was down for the count, she had a tendency to lose it when they ran into someone from the Maniwa—or Hakuhei Sabi, who had betrayed her too... Her staunch refusal to forgive and forget accorded with what she was doing to the Owari Bakufu.

Eyeing the pulverized remains of Kyoken Maniwa, then the body of Konayuki Itezora, resting at the feet of Shichika, and finally Shichika and Togame, Hohoh said, “What we have here...looks to be a worst-case scenario. Kyoken slain, the sword lost, and Madame Schemer viewing us once more as enemies, her trust in the Maniwa extinguished.”

“You think I ever trusted you?” Togame was not dialing it back. “Now what? You here to steal Soto the Twin? Not a bad time—you’ve caught my katana with his left arm broken. If he has to keep on fighting, even two ninjas like you have something of a chance of winning.”

This, of course, was all talk.

The Schemer seethed with indignation for the Maniwa, but she would not allow this to distract her from the task at hand. Fighting two Maniwa Bosses at the same time was too much to ask of Shichika, in his condition.

He could have handled Kawauso, taken singly—the trouble was with Hohoh.

A month ago, the ninja had chopped off his arm, but today he had shown up with two.

The Divine Phoenix, Hohoh Maniwa.

“Now don’t jump to conclusions, Madame Schemer—Kawauso and myself came here to waylay Kyoken. She acted rashly and dogmatically. I would hate for you to think that her behavior represents the viewpoint of the Maniwa as a whole.”

“Is that so—how should I know?”

“Come now, you know as well as I do just how passionate we Maniwa can be. Especially Kyoken, that feisty ninja. A real handful, even for me.”

“Hmm. But if she had killed us both, I assume you would be fine with that.”

“I cannot disagree, I’ll give you that. But as it stands,” said Hohoh, “we find this situation unacceptable—if this means you want to dissolve our alliance, Madame Schemer, we will abide.”

“Abide? Too late for that. Like it or not, the deal is off.”

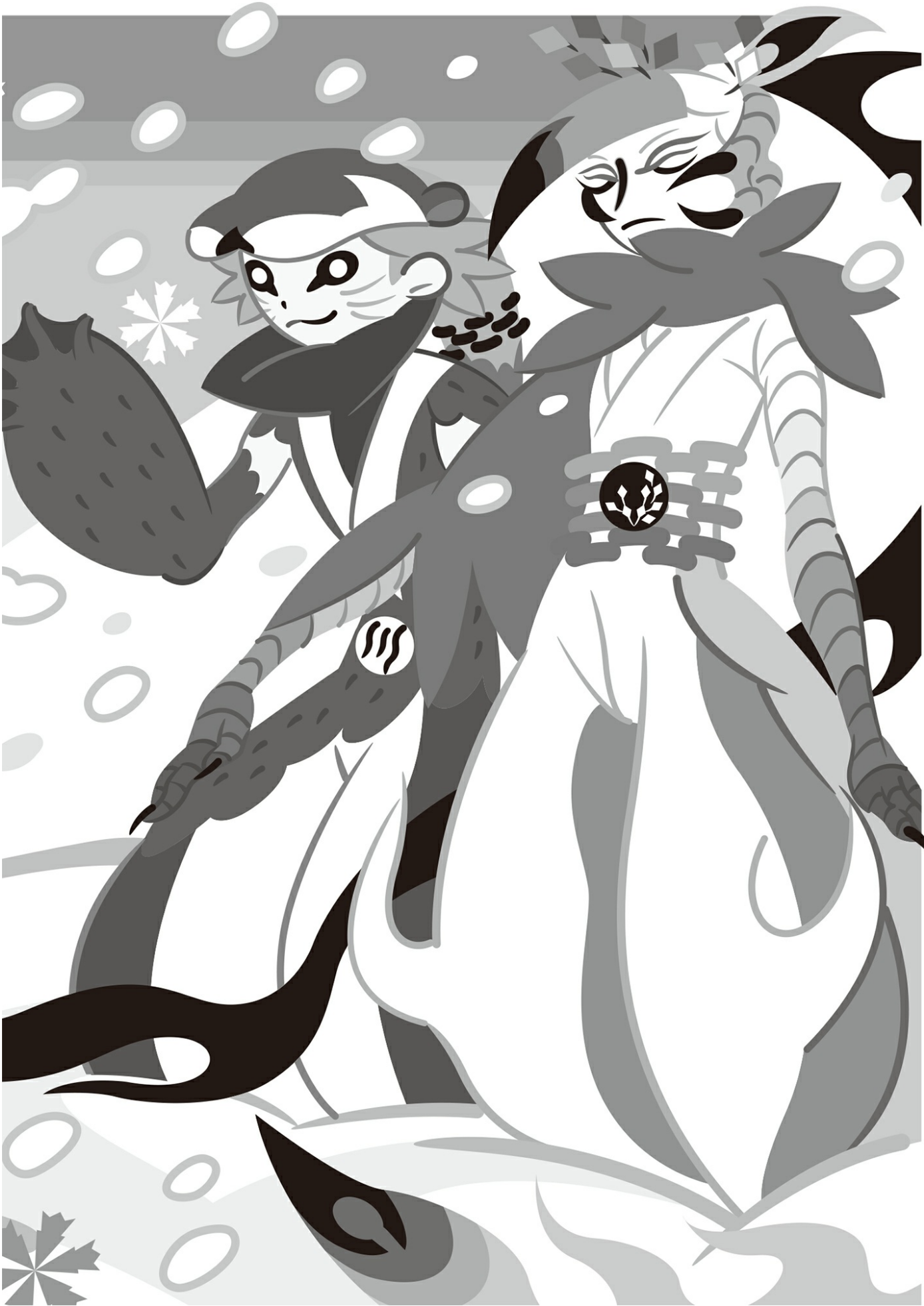
“Nonsense. This time, we were entirely to blame. We hope you will allow us to assume responsibility.”

“Responsibility? You better have some juicy news to share. That last batch is looking pretty iffy right about now...”

“Go ahead, Kawauso.”

“Yessir.” Unfazed by Togame’s sardonic remarks, Kawauso took one step forward, cracked a condescending smile, and began, “Now Togame, you’re no stranger to my ninpo. You remember my ninpo, right? The Infovac.”





“Infovac?”²⁶

Shichika squinted at this unfamiliar term.

Togame unpacked it for him. “Remember how Kyoken went through Konayuki’s memory after she took over her body? Well, Kauso does the same thing, but with inanimate objects: stone and steel, desks and chairs, houses and mansions, helmets and swords. He can read the history of things. Psychometry,²⁷ to put it simply.”

“Things have feelings too—Kyotoryu. But it’s not like I can read it all. I’m the opposite of Kyoken. I can’t read people’s feelings. I’m too bashful.”

Shichika gasped. “You mean...”

Even with a katana’s brains, it was easy to imagine just how useful this kind of ninpo would be in a scramble for the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki—so what if reading every single detail was beyond him? His ability to glean *an item’s history* made him a major threat.

He’d said “opposite”—but it was opposite in a whole other way. If Kyoken Maniwa was a persistent presence, then the ninja Kauso Maniwa could decipher persistent presences!

To think that the Maniwa had such a secret weapon all along!

No wonder Hohoh had been so forthcoming in his alliance with Togame.

He had an ace in the hole.²⁸

But what was his plan showing up here, waving his ace?

“Are you trying to make up for violating the agreement—by lending me Kauso?”

“Is that what you would like?”

“Fool. Why should I believe a ninja? The best I can hope for are easy lies.”

“If that’s the way you see it, how about this instead?”

Hohoh Maniwa moved his hand.

The blade of his hand, which he had used—to chop off his left arm.

But this time, the hand was aimed at Kawauso’s neck.

“Ah...!”

“...ulp!”

Togame yelped—and Shichika gasped yet again.

The blade of Hohoh’s hand, sharp as any sword, sent Kawauso’s noggin twirling through the air. That was the extent of the sideshow, which ended there without any further flourish.²⁹ Kawauso’s head, still wearing its faint smile, simply spun twice or thrice and bored into the snow. For a few moments, his headless body spewed blood like a geyser, standing upright—but it soon lost its balance, fell to its knees, and fell face...neck-first into the snow.

“Y-You!”

“There, the life of a Maniwa Boss. Just another ninja, but I beg you, please don’t take this lightly,” Hohoh deadpanned—showing her his bloody hand just like the month before. “With the loss of Kyoken and Kawauso, the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa have been reduced to a mere four, including me. At this point, Madame Schemer, we cannot pose a threat to you as enemies. What reason have you left to fear us? I would hope that you can find it in your heart now to pretend our little slipup with the treaty never happened.”

“Y-You’re supposed to be their leader!”

“Again, you overestimate me. The Maniwa have no use for a leader. Ninjas are born, and then they live, and then they die. What now?” Hohoh calmly continued with his intimidating overture. “If we still scare you even now that we have lost Kawauso’s psychometry, then I have no choice but to fight you, on my own. To see who gets the sword that girl was holding, Soto the Twin. Not like I could lift the heaviest sword in existence, but that’s irrelevant. Taking down the killer of my comrade is all the—”

“Enough, it never happened!” yelled Togame, not even letting Hohoh finish. “I’ll let it slide this time! Just get out of my sight! I’m sick of looking at your creepy smile!”

“I’m much obliged by this sudden generosity.”

With that, Hohoh Maniwa hoisted Kawauso’s body over his shoulder and crouched to pick up the severed head.

“Oh...Madame Schemer. About that last bit of intelligence, which you just said was looking pretty iffy. I have an update, and while I have you here, I may as well fill you in. I told you that three of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki could be found in Mt. Shirei, Tendo, and Edo—but it seems that the owner of the sword in Mt. Shirei has changed.”

“The owner...changed?”

“Not that we Maniwa can take the credit—and considering your recent schedule, neither can you... In other words, a *third party* has started their own Sword Hunt.”

Speaking without inflection, Hohoh turned his back on Shichika and Togame.

“I hear our rival boarded a ship in Mutsu³⁰ that is headed for Shikoku. As with Princess Negative...I suggest that you address this threat as soon as possible.

Mt. Shirei is a Level One Disaster Area, just like Mt. Odori, but it got *demolished* in a mere quarter of an hour—sounds like a real monster.”

¹ 重鎮 JŪCHIN important person 重い OMOI heavy 鎮 CHIN a weight ² 逐一丁寧に説明 CHIKU’ICHI TEINEI NI SETSUMEI explain carefully, point by point ³ 元凶 GENKYŌ “source evil” root of an unpleasant situation ⁴ 星の巡りの悪い HOSHI NO MEGURI NO WARUI star-crossed ⁵ 狂犬発動 KYŌKEN HATSUDŌ pun on 強権発動 KYŌKEN HATSUDŌ invoking state power ⁶ 伝染の狂犬 DENSEN NO KYŌKEN “The Contagious Mad Dog”

⁷ 残留思念 ZANRYŪ SHINEN “lingering ideation” (paranormal, usually of a dead person) ⁸ 水臭い MIZUKUSAI “disagreeably watery” (恐水病 KYŌSUI BYŌ “water-fearing disease” = rabies) ⁹ 感嘆 KANTAN awestruck 感じる KANJIRU to feel 嘆く NAGEKU to wail ¹⁰ 手詰まり TEZUMARI “out of hands (moves)”

¹¹ ためらいなく TAMERAI NAKU without hesitation ¹² 根こそぎ NEKOSOGI “roots and all”

¹³ 遺伝子 IDENSHI genes (i.e. deliberate anachronism) ¹⁴ ばか正直 BAKA SHŌJIKI “stupid straightforward”

¹⁵ 死に絶える SHINI TAERU “die off” compound of the preceding 死ぬ SHINU die 絶える TAERU cease ¹⁶ 木偶の坊 DEKU NO BŌ wooden doll or puppet ¹⁷ 梅 UME plum often pickled to be sour; a nuance here of punchy tartness ¹⁸ 定石 定跡 JŌSEKI JŌSEKI “set stone” “set path” optimal moves in go and shogi, respectively ¹⁹ 速さで翻弄する HAYASA DE HONRŌ SURU make sport by virtue of speed ²⁰ 夜顔 YORUGAO “The Moonflower”

(literally, “night face” vs. 朝顔 ASAGAO Morning Glory) ²¹ 双刀之犬 SŌTŌ NO INU “Dog of the Twin Katana”

²² 飛花落葉 HIKA RAKUYŌ “Spattering Flower Petals”

²³ 鞘打ち SAYA’UCHI “scabbard blow” vs. 峰打ち MINE’UCHI hitting with the spine of the sword ²⁴ 斬り伏せて KIRI FUSETE “cut down”

²⁵ ひらひら HIRA HIRA onomatopoeia for gentle flapping ²⁶ 記録辿り KIROKU TADORI “tracing the record”

²⁷ 探魂法 TANKON HŌ “a means for searching souls” (not a simple word, in English or in Japanese) ²⁸ 切り札 KIRIFUDA trump card

²⁹ 銜い TERAİ pretense

³⁰ 陸奥 MUTSU modern-day Aomori, at the northern tip of Honshu, the main island of Japan



EPILOGUE



Togame the Schemer would have to wait to learn the reason—but with wits like hers, there was nothing odd about her figuring out sooner, before the month was out.

The reason Konayuki, searching for Soto the Twin, had returned to the village alone...or, in other words, the reason she had not wanted either of them coming anywhere near the village...

It had happened the month before.

According to Konayuki—last month, an avalanche had buried their village.

But think about it.

How could a *mountaintop* village be buried by an avalanche?

And this thing about finding the sword in the buried village—even if she knew exactly where it was, could one night possibly be enough?

For all her youthful goodness, naïveté and innocence, and simple, artless disposition, Konayuki was by no means honest. Her lying went beyond finding the Twin a “worthy” owner.

She had lied about the avalanche.

But the village being wiped out was no lie.

It was a cold hard fact.

It happened while Konayuki was on a trek outside the village—in other words, she had no idea what wiped it out.

The Itezoras probably never knew what hit them.

Her arrival had upended their environs far swifter than an avalanche—precise, oh so precise, and devastating, oh so devastating—it blew through every member of the House of Itezora.

The Itezoras' monstrous strength? Irrelevant.

Old and young, men and women and children.

The Itezoras—eighteen families and forty-six individuals, not counting Konayuki.

Every life was taken.

Without mercy.

Slaying total amateurs and seasoned veterans alike.

As if she were—a sword incarnate.

None of them could comprehend it, much less stop it, but one thing was clear—a cold and fleeting comfort.

At least they knew why she was here.

The Mutant Blade of Kiki Shikizaki—Soto the Twin.

The Itezoras were veritable sheaths, safeguarding the Twin throughout the Age of Warring States, not even surrendering the sword to the Old Shogun.

But once the *sheaths* were splintered, she picked up Soto the Twin, *using the monstrous strength that she had gleaned whilst battling the Itezoras.*

“Not the one,” she said.

Astounding—this was a Mutant Blade, one of the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki, worth enough to buy a country, and she was being *picky*.

She had wiped out an entire village, all its people, just to leave the sword behind.

“I can’t use the Harlequin Butterfly, or this monstrous strength, for long stretches... This thing will drag me down. It’s not too pretty, either. Not the sword for me. That’s fine, I’ll just leave it somewhere obvious so Shichika can find it. Anyway, I’m glad I fought them all at once. That made it easy. I would have lost if I’d taken them on one by one—I hope things work out like that again.”

She muttered on, like it was nothing—“I guess I’ll forge ahead to Mt. Shirei, only who knows if I’ll get there, I’m so awful with directions”—and left the summit behind.

Soon after, Konayuki made it to the village and found her entire clan slaughtered.



Togame the Schemer had been dead set on returning to Owari if and when¹ she secured Soto the Twin—but her plans were derailed yet again. Whether or not this lead about the “monster” was legitimate, she had no choice but to pursue it.

She and the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu waited for Konayuki to regain consciousness before going down the mountain—as a trio.

Level One Disaster Area. Homeland of the Itezoras, Mt. Odori.

This came as a result of painstaking “negotiations” between Konayuki, who did not want to leave the mountain, and Togame, who needed her to haul the sword back to Owari, but let us skip the details—out of necessity, since the negotiations dragged on for that long. It seemed to Shichika, listening in, that Togame had not relaxed her game simply because she was dealing with a child. In other words, the Schemer inveigled Konayuki with all the usual gusto, as the Schemer, engaging the girl with the utmost sincerity in her efforts at persuasion.

This wouldn't be taking so long if Togame just came down to her level, thought Shichika, but he knew to keep his mouth shut.

The ploy Togame had in mind for swaying Konayuki was quite simple: she could live at Triad Shrine in Izumo.

A place for women who had lost their way.

Everybody there had baggage—an anomaly like Konayuki would not even stand out. Indeed, in the absence of Meisai Tsuruga, the abominably strong Konayuki Itezora would someday make a fine steward.

With one stone, they could kill two birds, or even three. This was a case study in thinking Togame-style.

Though we might say the prey were rabbits rather than birds.

Togame's speech on Triad Shrine went over Konayuki's head, but at the very least, she managed to convey that the girl would never be alone there. It took some time, but Konayuki finally agreed—and said she would be happy to deliver

the Twin to Owari.

“I’m sorry for lying to you, Miss Togame and Mister Shichika,” she said. “But spending time with you the past four days was super fun.”

Escorted by government officials, Konayuki boarded a ship bound for Owari, carrying Soto the Twin in one hand and the burden of a lie left unconfessed—but castigating her for this would be too cruel.

While Konayuki may have beaten Shichika Yasuri, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, she was only ten. Why would she want to talk about finding the bodies of her family?

“Think we’ll ever see her again?”

They were on a ship to Shikoku—this time, without a doubt, honestly heading to Shikoku—when Shichika lobbed the question at Togame.

Despite the ambiguity of the pronoun, the “her” was clearly Konayuki Itezora, whom they had bid farewell at the harbor.

“I wonder how she’ll make out.”²

“Make out?³ With Konayuki?” Togame panicked at what she thought she heard. “D-Don’t tell me that you’re into little girls... Wh-What’s she have that I don’t... Wait, wait, are you still mad about what happened? If I did something that upset you, just tell me, and I’ll make it right.”

“Whoa, whoa. I mean her future. How things’ll go,” Shichika corrected Togame’s misunderstanding with a baffled expression. “Anyway, I may have beaten Kyoken, but as it stands, I lost to Konayuki. I know what you mean, Togame, about it being a good thing, but because I did beat Kyoken, I can’t let go of it.”

“Right...we’ve been through this, Shichika. That was beginner’s luck. Konayuki is a total amateur. It was no more than an accident, the collision of two very different skillsets. Don’t let it get to you. It doesn’t even count as a defeat.”

“I wonder, though. I have a hard time seeing it that way.”

“What I will say is we could have been more careful. No question there, so I’m glad you learned your lesson. But now I need for you to focus on recuperating. If what Hohoh Maniwa said is true, your next opponent is a monster. And by monster, I mean someone who can demolish a Level One Disaster Area.”

“Sounds like a bunch of hogwash. No one out there is that awesome. Although I was pretty impressed by Hakuhei Sabi... Come on, Togame, isn’t this another ninja lie?”

“Perhaps, but we must see for ourselves.”

“Fine. What about Owari and...Princess What’s-Her-Name?”

“It does trouble me...but when I think it through, I have to say, *if I were in her shoes*, I would lay low for the time being, no matter what I planned on doing next. I’ll bet anything that nasty woman is waiting on my doorstep.⁴ I’m dying to get back to Owari, but it’s so fun to keep her waiting.”

“Hmm. Sounds like a tough person to deal with. Anyways, Togame, now that we’re going to Shikoku, I’ll finally get to see that thing the Old Shogun put up when he was done with his Great Sword Hunt—the Katana Buddha.”

“I don’t need you acting like a tourist, but I suppose we can swing by... You could use a little break.”

“Hey, which do you think is heavier, the Katana Buddha or Soto the Twin? I know that the Katana Buddha was made from like a hundred thousand swords, but the Twin has gotta be heavier than that. To be honest, I’m kind of worried

that Konayuki's ship might sink before she makes it to Owari."

"No need to worry. She's on a man-of-war,⁵ the pride of the Owari Bakufu. The Old Shogun never saw a ship the likes of this. It's practically unsinkable. But why bring up Konayuki again? Can't we let her go? Don't tell me that you really had a change of heart... Hey, it's been forever since you wrapped my hair around your body. If you were so inclined..."

Togame seemed legitimately concerned.

But since the state of Shichika's devotion was a matter of life and death, this should not exactly come as a surprise.

"I could never have a change of heart, Togame. I'm your sword."

"Good to know, but seriously..." The Schemer eyed Shichika suspiciously and gave him a bitter smile. "If you absolutely have to settle things with Konayuki, you can do it when we're done with the whole Sword Hunt."

"Okay."

By this, Togame was not making any promises about what would happen *when the Sword Hunt was over*—she was simply making conversation, no more than a flight of fancy.

Reading into it would be an error.

In the end—Togame sought revenge against the Kyotoryu.

Shichika knew as much—but nevertheless.

It was enough to fill his heart with warmth.

"Sounds like a plan, Togame."

Shichika Yasuri, a sword incarnate.

His humanity was growing steadily stronger as the Sword Hunt continued...



Next month—in the seventh month of the year, Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, would be snapped in half.

A broken sword, or a broken heart?

Or both equally broken?

The showdown would take place at the greatest of all holy sites for swordsmen—Mt. Sayabashiri in Tosa, Seiryoin Gokenji Temple, home to the Katana Buddha.

But this monster that had plowed through two Level One Disaster Areas like they were nothing—was none other than Shichika’s big sister, Nanami Yasuri, head of the house. Unbeknownst to him, the two would have their showdown soon enough. So far, he had beaten two owners of a Possessed without them dying, first Kanara Azekura, and now Konayuki Itezora—but in the coming showdown, he would murder his own sister.

Soto the Twin: Check

End of Book Six

To Be Continued

- ¹ 暁には AKATSUKI NI WA “at daybreak” in the event
- ² 心残り KOKORO NOKORI “remaining in the heart” regrets
- ³ 心変わり KOKORO GAWARI “change of heart” lose romantic interest
- ⁴ 帰り待ち KAERI MACHI standing by until someone returns
- ⁵ 大型軍艦 ŌGATA GUNKAN “large-sized military vessel”

CHARACTER
INDEX 6

KONAYUKI ITEZORA



AGE	Ten
OCCUPATION	Hunter
AFFILIATION	House of Itezora
STATUS	Villager
POSSESSED	Soto the Twin
HEIGHT	4' 2"
WEIGHT	74 lbs.
HOBBY	Walks

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

FOAMING MOUTH	↩↗↘↙↘ SLASH THRUST
HOUNDSTOOTH	↑↗↘↙↘ THRUST



OPPONENT	Nanami Yasuri
OBJECTIVE	Akuto the Eel
VENUE	Tosa: Gokenji Temple

There's this idea out there about how "Losing is Important," how mistakes are the mother of success, and the more you think it over, losing is really not so bad. There isn't always a reason for success, but there's always a reason for failure—or so the saying goes, but this suggests that if you really want to succeed, it makes more sense to study how others have failed than how others have succeeded, and in my opinion, this is not necessarily the worst advice. If you know where others have tripped up, you can remain conscious of these areas and possibly avoid them, and if you keep on avoiding failure, pretty soon you'll find yourself on the route to success—at least, theoretically. If this theory has one failing, it's that "not failing" is not strictly the same as "succeeding" (as there are no small number of situations where a certain amount of "failure" is the price we have to pay in order to "succeed"), but in most cases, for most people, the desire to "succeed" is not nearly as strong as the desire "not to fail." We're not obsessed with being above average, but horrified at the thought of being below average. Know what I mean? If there's anything I can say about all that, it's that there's nothing wrong with losing, but that doesn't mean it always feels good. No one ever gets used to losing. Every time it happens, we get hurt again. Of course, we also think that "Winning is Important"—but "winning," unlike "losing," is something that we wind up getting used to, impudence and complacency being two obvious examples. It's a sad fact, enough to make you feel like people are fundamentally negative creatures, but heading into things assuming that you're going to fail defeats the purpose of doing anything at all. But then again, some monsters out there reach the highest heights of success

only to tell themselves “I haven’t made it yet” and keep on pushing higher. People never cease to amaze me.

That’s about it for Book Six of *KATANAGATARI*. It’s the sixth volume of a twelve-volume series, so we’re exactly at the midpoint of the story. But who knows, maybe I won’t be done when I hit twelve books?! It might wind up as twenty-four, and for all you know, the next book will be the last. Since this time the stage was set in Hokkaido, I sent Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri of the Kyotoryu on a long hike up a snowy mountain. The snowy landscapes drawn by *take* are so splendid it almost makes me want to set the rest of the series in the snow, but the next book will take place in Shikoku. Now that we’re entering the second half, things might get a little gnarly, but I hope those of you who’ve read this far stick with me to the end.

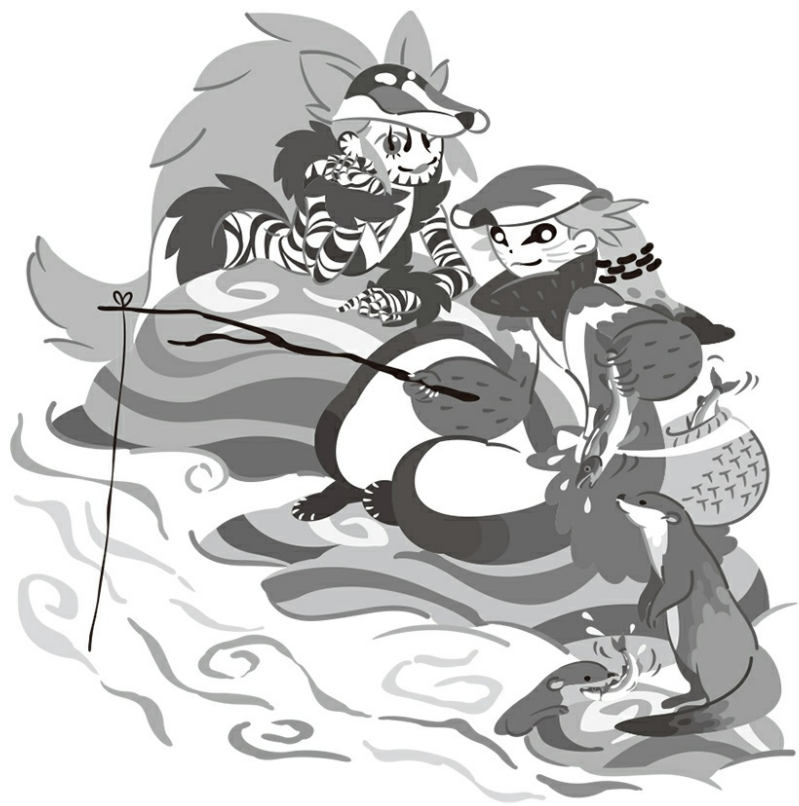
Six more to go!

NISIOISIN

Palindromic **NISIOISIN** made his debut as a novelist when he was twenty. Famously prolific, he is known to publish more than a book per month at times and is a leading light among writers who began their careers in the twenty-first century.

Beloved illustrator **take** is also known for adorning the *Zaregoto* mystery cycle with striking visuals.

Sam Bett won Grand Prize in the 2016 JLPP International Translation Competition. With David Boyd, he is cotranslating the novels of Mieko Kawakami.



KATANAGATARI 2

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